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**The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965-1991 : from Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale: a detailed study of Cuban internationalism and the Angolan War.**

# The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991

## from Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale:

## A detailed study of Cuban internationalism & the Angolan War

## (Vol. 1)

by

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## Abstract

In January 1965 the Cuban Revolutionary government established a military and political alliance with a Marxist-oriented Angolan liberation movement which was to endure for more than twenty-five years, gradually growing in importance until by the mid-1980s it had become the flagship of Cuban 'internationalism' abroad. Born almost by accident as a back-up training mission to Che Guevara's guerrilla campaign in the Congo, the Cuban-MPLA alliance would survive the traumatic years preceding Portugal's Carnation Revolution in April 1974, providing the opportunity for Cuba to launch the largest overseas military intervention in its history – Operation Carlota – which in turn spawned Cuba's fifteen-year military occupation of Angola (1976-1991). The aim of the thesis, therefore, is to explain why a Caribbean country ended up sending as many as half a million of its citizens nearly six thousand miles to fight in sub-Saharan Africa, and to examine how a short-term military intervention developed into a lengthy war of intervention, culminating in the spurious Cuban 'victory' at Cuito Cuanavale. Previous studies of the Angolan War have tended to focus on one particular protagonist or aspect of the complex interventionist conflict which developed between 1975 and 1988, and this thesis attempts for the first time to bring together the many different competing strands in the Angolan conflict, examining the complex interaction between the principal protagonists – the Angolan liberation movements, South Africa, the Soviet Union, the USA and Zaire – and demonstrating how their interdependent actions affected and shaped Cuba's intervention, which is the principal focus of this study.

*a mi amigo y mentor cubano*

*Octavio Guerra Royo*

*por todas las conversaciones*

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in this dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

This dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED:  DATE: 24/11/01

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# Introduction

In November 1975 Cuba launched the largest overseas military intervention in its history – Operation Carlota – sending a total of 36,000 troops into Angola to defend its Marxist ally from twin invasions by South African and Zairian forces. This unprecedented event – which overnight converted Angola into one of the principal points of Cold War confrontation – did not arise out of a vacuum, however, but was in fact the culmination of more than a decade of uneven military cooperation between the Cuban government and the MPLA, dating back to Che Guevara's guerrilla campaign in eastern Congo in the mid-1960s. Over the next thirteen years the Cuban military contingent continued to grow until by 1988 – when Cuban and South African forces engaged in the second largest battle in African history at Cuito Cuanavale – there were over 65,000 Cuban troops in Angola, proportionally three times the US military's commitment overseas during this period.[1] The Cuban soldiers fighting in Angola professed to be upholding the ideals of 'internationalism', an ideology which was little understood in the West and which many opponents of the Castro regime dismissed as a mask for Soviet military imperialism. Yet despite being labelled 'Moscow's Gurkhas' by some, the Cuban 'internationalists' in Angola elicited overwhelming support from the vast majority of African states, catapulting their leader – the charismatic and much maligned Fidel Castro – back onto the international stage, and by the early 1980s turning him into the unofficial spokesman of the Third World. The fifteen-year intervention in Angola would end up shaping the lives of an entire generation of Cubans – nearly half a million of them serving there before the withdrawal in 1991 – and would leave a scar on the Cuban consciousness every bit as profound as the Vietnam War had on the USA.

The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to explain how this extraordinary event in Cuban and Angolan history came about, from the tentative beginnings of the Cuban-MPLA

[1] William Ratliff, 'Política Militar Cubana en el África Subsahariana', Revista Occidental (2) 1989, Série Estudios Latinoamericanos, 1989, p.154. In late 1968 – at the peak of its military commitment to the Vietnam War – the US Military had more than half a million American troops stationed in Vietnam. In comparison, the Cuban military contingent in Angola might have topped 80,000 troops by the early 1980s, making it proportionally four times larger than the American intervention in Vietnam (1961-73), and of much the same length. See Chapter 6 for a full discussion of Cuban troop numbers in Angola.

alliance in the mid-1960s to the massive military intervention in November 1975, which in turn spawned Cuba's fifteen-year occupation of Angola. Previous studies of the Angolan War have tended to examine Cuba's role in isolation – or as subordinate to Soviet interests – and this thesis attempts for the first time to explore the multidimensional character of the conflict which developed in Angola from late 1974 onwards, demonstrating how the interaction between the main players in the Angolan drama shaped and affected the Cuban intervention, which is the principal focus of this study. The first two chapters of the thesis therefore concentrate on the roots of the Cuban-MPLA relationship, examining the evolution of Che Guevara's particular brand of internationalism which led to the two-year Brazzaville mission (1965-67), and the subsequent weakening of this alliance in the early 1970s as both parties underwent internal crises. Following the Portuguese decision to decolonise Angola (in mid-1974), the thesis then expands to take in the actions of the other principal actors in Angola's chaotic decolonisation – the Angolan liberation movements themselves (the MPLA, the FNLA & UNITA), South Africa, the Soviet Union, the USA and Zaire – and follows their fruitless struggle to gain ascendancy in Angola, culminating in the partially-successful New York Peace Accords in December 1988.

Like all of its contemporary Cold War conflicts, the Angolan War has produced its fair share of warped propaganda and disinformation, and throughout thirty years of near-continuous conflict all those involved have seen fit to re-write events after they occurred to further their changing political agendas. A balanced analysis of Cuba's involvement in Angola is further hampered by the extreme polarisation of opinion on the Cuban Revolution and its most notorious protagonist – Fidel Castro – who some have chosen to depict as the saviour of the Cuban people and the champion of the Third World, whilst others have labelled him both a Soviet puppet and a monstrous dictator who has ruthlessly maintained his grip on the reins of power in Cuba for more than four decades. Such extreme views on Revolutionary Cuba and its outspoken leader fail, however, to shed any light on the powerful ideologies which motivated the hundreds of thousands of men and women who fought in the Angolan War: for the Cubans the constantly-evolving model of Che Guevara's 'internationalism', for the Angolans (at least on paper) Marxist-Leninism, and for the South Africans 'Total

Onslaught', an apocalyptic theory which depicted Pretoria as the last bastion of Western values against the 'Communist onslaught'.

Given the vast of amount of confused and contradictory reporting from the war zone (an inevitable consequence of the fighting on the ground) – and the heavily-biased official accounts of the fighting produced by each side during and after the war – it has proved essential to draw on first-hand accounts of those involved in the Angolan conflict, from the politicians in Havana, Luanda and Pretoria, to the ordinary troops on the ground. For this reason, during nearly a year spent in Cuba between 1997 and 2000 (and two visits to Miami), I interviewed more than two dozen Cuban internationalist veterans of Angola, among them professional FAR officers, reservists and civilians (who worked on humanitarian projects there). Their views represent both extremes of the political spectrum – from die-hard Communist Revolutionaries to convinced anti-Castro Miami-Cubans – and their detailed testimony sheds fresh light on the experience of Cubans serving in Angola, painting a bleak picture of Cuban-Angolan relations which contrasts starkly with the harmonious brotherly relations depicted by the Havana and Luanda regimes (see Chapter 7). During a three-month visit to Angola in early 1998 (when by fortune there was a lull in the fighting), I visited some of the battlegrounds of the war, most notably Quifangongo, Cuito Cuanavale and Kuito-Bié, and I interviewed a dozen or so Angolan veterans of the 1985-88 campaigns who provided me with detailed information about the fighting in Cuando Cubango. I followed my trip to Angola with a three-month stint in South Africa where I interviewed many ex-SADF officers who served in Angola as well as senior Pretoria politicians, most notably the former President PW Botha.

Drawing on their first-hand accounts – and also on much new material garnered from libraries, institutes and private sources in Cuba, Angola and South Africa (see Acknowledgements & Bibliography for details) – this thesis attempts to construct as accurate a picture as possible of the chaotic fighting which developed in Angola, dispelling many of the myths associated with the Cuban intervention. In particular, a fresh examination of the events leading up to the launch of Operation Carlota (November 1975) seeks to demonstrate that Havana's decision to intervene militarily

was not so much an heroic gesture of international solidarity with the MPLA, but rather a last-ditch gamble to avert military disaster in Angola (see Chapter 4). By the same token, the FAR's much-heralded 'victory' against the South Africans at Cuito Cuanavale is shown to have been no more than a costly stand-off, its real significance lying in the impetus it gave to the American-brokered peace process (see Chapters 9-11). Given the extremity of the ideological clash in Angola – and the fierce disagreement which still exists over the outcome of major events in the war (and the motivations of the parties involved) – the ultimate goal of this thesis is to explain Cuba's evolving relationship with Angola in the context of the many conflicting (and occasionally complementary) agendas of the other protagonists in the Angolan War. Only by examining the complex interplay between the many bickering parties can a more accurate picture be constructed of the chaotic chain of events which escalated Angola's dormant guerrilla insurgency into a full-scale war of intervention, spawning the chronic conflict which continues to plague Angola to this day.

**Outline of thesis**

The thesis is divided into twelve chapters, each covering a separate period of Cuban-Angolan relations running from 1959 to 1991. Chapter 1 explores the evolution of internationalism during the first six years of the Cuban Revolution (1959-1965), and examines how this led to the official founding of the Cuban-MPLA alliance in January 1965. Chapter 2 covers the Cuban mission to train the MPLA in Brazzaville (1965-67), and the subsequent weakening of the Cuban-MPLA alliance in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Cuba entered its 'Institutionalisation' process. Chapter 3 examines the Carnation Revolution in Portugal (25 April 1974) and the subsequent attempts by the Portuguese government to decolonise Angola against a background of increasing intervention by foreign powers, Cuba initially being the least significant among them. Chapter 4 examines the two principal military interventions in Angola in the run-up to Independence Day (11 November 1975) – first by South Africa (Operation Savannah) and then by Cuba (Operation Carlota) – while Chapter 5 explores the so-called 'Second Liberation War' which followed, ending with the MPLA-Cuban victory in March 1976 and the withdrawal of South African forces.

Chapter 6 covers the period immediately following the war (1976-1981) during which Cuba attempted to curtail its operation in Angola in the face of growing instability (caused by the Nito Alves coup and the Shaba invasions), culminating in the abandonment of the withdrawal programme after South Africa occupied southern Angola in August 1981 (Operation Protea).

Chapter 7 breaks the chronology slightly, examining the experiences and motivations of ordinary Cuban internationalists serving in Angola in the period 1976-1991, and is for the most part based on interviews carried out by the author with veterans who served there. Chapter 8 then covers the period from 1981 to 1985 during which the fighting and instability in Angola intensified – with the rise of UNITA and further South African interventions in southern Angola – and also examines the abortive negotiations brokered by Chester Crocker which continued until the repeal of the Clark Amendment in July 1985, sparking full-scale war. Chapter 9 then examines the period of the great Soviet offensives against UNITA's bases in Cuando Cubango (1985-1987), culminating in the disastrous Operation Saludando Octubre (July-October 1987) which precipitated a fresh military crisis in Angola, and forced Cuba to launch its final military intervention in Angola ('Maniobra XXXI Aniversario'). Chapter 10 deals with the 'Battle of Cuito Cuanavale' (January-March 1988) which followed between Cuban and South African forces, while Chapter 11 covers the closing stages of the war in southwest Angola (including the Tchipa and Calueque battles) and the negotiating endgame which culminated in the New York Peace Accords in December 1988. And finally Chapter 12 covers the Cuban withdrawal from Angola (1989-1991), including the controversial trial and execution of one of the war's most famous veterans, Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, for alleged offences committed during his time in Angola.

A bibliography of principal works consulted is included, along with a list of the most common abbreviations used in the text, a description of the main weaponry & military equipment used by the forces fighting in Angola, and an abridged chronology of the Angolan War (1956-99). Appendix 1 contains the text of the main official documents produced during the Angolan War (including all the peace agreements), Appendix 2

contains detailed studies of some of the more important issues tangential to the main thesis (for example, Cuba's 10 Million Ton Harvest in 1970), and Appendix 3 contains maps of Angola and of the principal military confrontations which occurred between 1961 and 1988. The question of place names in Angola is particularly complex as more than half of Angola's towns changed their names following independence – some of them more than once – and a list of the main variants is included, along with basic data on Angola's eighteen provinces, and a list of the main SADF operations in Angola between 1975 and 1988 (the period of the Cuban intervention). For more detailed analysis, my Full Chronology of the Angolan War (on Microsoft Excel 2000 spreadsheet) totalling over 2,000 entries is included on CD-ROM – showing the interdependent evolution of each of the main protagonists' policies towards Angola over nearly forty years – along with the full text of the thesis (on Microsoft Word 2000).

**Brief description of Angola**

Angola is nearly half a million square miles in area (over five times the size of Britain), and is currently divided into eighteen different provinces (see map). North of the Congo river lies the tiny enclave of Cabinda, a historical oddity which has proved an economic life-line to the Luanda regime, providing it with more than three quarters of Angola's hard currency revenue from the export of oil.[2] Cabinda's proximity to Congo-Brazzaville and the vast Mayombe jungle encouraged the early development of guerrilla activity, but eventually the extreme difficulty of the terrain

[2] The existence of the enclave of Cabinda resulted from complex border negotiations between the French, Belgian and Portuguese at the Berlin Conference (1884/1885). By virtue of its 15th Century conquests, Portugal claimed both banks of the lower Congo as far east as Vivi (the last port before the cataracts). King Léopold of Belgium claimed Noqui (wishing to join Léopoldville by railway to a deep-water port on the Atlantic), while the French demanded the entire northern bank of the Congo from Brazzaville to Vivi. The Portuguese refused to give up their tiny colony in Cabinda, however, and later in Paris a compromise deal was agreed which produced the current border. Portugal kept Cabinda, and was given Noqui as an important Atlantic port and the right bank of the Congo by the coast; France kept Brazzaville and got an Atlantic port at Pointe-Noire; and Belgium got two ports (Vivi and Banana) as well as the entire upper Congo (Thomas Pakenham, The Scramble for Africa: 1876-1912, Abacus, London, 1992, pp.250-252). Cabinda was administrated separately until 1958 when it was incorporated into Angola, fuelling challenges from FLEC (Front de Libération de l'Enclave de Cabinda, 'Liberation Front of the Cabinda Enclave') which has continued to demand independence from Angola to the present day. It is estimated that by 2006 Cabinda will have surpassed Nigeria in oil production, making Angola the largest oil-exporter in Africa.

forced the MPLA and its Cuban instructors to scale down their insurgency there and concentrate on other areas of Angola (most notably Moxico, see below).[3] In the north of Angola, Zaire and Uíge provinces cling to the border with Congo-Kinshasa (formerly Zaire),[4] and are dominated by the Bakongo ethnic group whose ties with other Bakongos in the region have encouraged a close relationship with Kinshasa (to which they have often looked for economic and military support). Further south Luanda province is dominated by the city of Luanda – Angola's economic, commercial and political capital – and along with the neighbouring provinces of Bengo, Cuanza Norte, Cuanza Sul and Malanje represents the heartland of the Mbundu ethnic group (see below). Further south still, Benguela province was until its incorporation into Angola an important commercial and political centre in its own right – containing Angola's two most important commercial ports at Benguela and Lobito – and is the starting point for the Benguela railway which runs from the coast through the central highlands and deserted eastern plateau to Luau on the Zairian border.[5] The two provinces immediately east of Benguela – Huambo and Bié – are the traditional homeland of the Ovimbundu ethnic group, and were the location for the last burst of Portuguese colonisation in the 1960s and early 1970s (hence the proposed new capital of Angola – Nova Lisboa – in Huambo).

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[3] FLEC has carried out a sporadic guerrilla insurgency in Cabinda since its foundation in August 1963, but its attempts to take control of the enclave have proved for the most part ineffective. In part this is due to the fact that the enclave's main oil-producing areas are all located on or just off the coast, making the enclave's principal economic assets relatively easy to defend first by the Portuguese and then by the MPLA (which stationed a 5,000-man Cuban garrison there for the duration of the Cuban intervention). FLEC's failure is also due, however, to changing alliances in the region, schisms within FLEC itself and the remoteness of the Cabindan interior from main-stream Angolan life.

[4] The Belgian Congo has gone by many different names since independence: the Republic of the Congo (1960-1964); the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1964-1971), the Republic of Zaire (1971-1997); and back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in May 1997. It has also often been referred to as Congo-Léopoldville and then Congo-Kinshasa after the capital was renamed in 1966. For ease of reading, I have referred to it as Congo-Kinshasa when relating to events before 1971, and Zaire in all other cases. The neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo is referred to throughout as Congo-Brazzaville to avoid any confusion.

[5] The 700-mile-long Benguela railway line was built in the early 20th century by a Scotsman, and was until independence one of Angola's principal sources of revenue, shipping vast quantities of copper from mines in Katanga (Belgian Congo) to Lobito for transhipment. Following the withdrawal of the Portuguese, however, intense fighting and guerrilla activity along the Benguela railway line brought it to a standstill, and by the mid-1990s of the c.390 bridges along its length a total of 385 had been completely destroyed. When I visited Angola in March 1998, the only section still operational was the twenty-mile segment from Benguela to Lobito.

South and east of these core Angolan provinces lies the vast and sparsely-populated periphery of Angola, containing many of the smaller ethnic groups and large tracts of uninhabited land.[6] Directly south of Benguela is Namibe – a barren and desert-like province served by the small port of Namibe (formerly Moçâmedes) – and to its east lies the most populous southern province – Huíla – which is crossed by another railway line stretching to Menongue.[7] One of Angola's principal rivers – the Cunene – cuts south through Huíla (there is a large hydroelectric plant at Matala) and down into the province of Cunene, forming the western border with Namibia. The joint Portuguese-South African hydroelectric installations at Calueque and Ruacaná have ensured heavy South African involvement in this province since the late 1960s, and were to provide the pretext for the South African intervention in 1975 (see Chapters 3 & 4). And finally on the eastern edge of Angola lie the remotest provinces of all. In the north-east are the Lundas (Lunda Norte & Lunda Sul), an area covered in thick jungle terrain which contains some of the world's richest diamond mines, making the region a tempting target for foreign mining companies, bandits and guerrillas. To the south (forming most of Angola's border with Zambia) is Moxico – Angola's single largest province at over 86,000 square miles – and along its southern border is Cuando Cubango, described by the Portuguese as the 'Terras do Fim do Mundo' ('Lands at the End of the Earth').[8] The extreme remoteness and size of Moxico and Cuando Cubango made these provinces ideal areas for running guerrilla operations, and both the MPLA (in the 1960s and early 1970s) and UNITA (in the 1980s) would use these territories to launch their challenge to the ruling regime in Luanda, ultimately bringing some of the bitterest fighting of the Angolan War into these remote areas (see Chapters 8-10).

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[6] According to many Angolans I met in Cuando Cubango and Bié in 1998, the periphery of Angola actually had a significant population before the war broke out, but the majority of it has fled since the fighting, turning once-prosperous settlements at Menongue, Cuito Cuanavale and Kuito-Bié into ghost towns.

[7] From the late 1970s until the late 1980s, this railway line formed the backbone of the Cuban-manned ATS (Agrupación Tropas del Sur, Southern Troup Grouping) Defence Line, effectively delineating the southern border between MPLA-held territory to the north and the vast UNITA-infested no-man's-land to the south and east. The railway has remained more or less operational in Huíla, and during my stay in Angola in early 1998 I was able to travel from Lubango to Matala on the train, after which the line has been destroyed. Menongue railway station is now disused and contains a café with a solitary table.

[8] UNITA's secret base at Jamba (Cuando Cubango) is a little over 900 miles from Luanda, yet only 20 miles from the Caprivi Strip from where it has until recently received all its supplies.

## Principal ethnic groups in Angola

Angola has a population of around 11 million,[9] and contains at least eight distinct ethnic groups – each with its own language and host of dialects – the most prominent of which are the Mbundu, the Bakongo and the Ovimbundu (see map).[10] Representing over three quarters of the indigenous population (25%, 15% and 37% respectively),[11] these three ethnic groups dominate the Angolan political landscape, and the intense and often bitter rivalry between them has often been used by external powers to maintain their grip on the country. Given the proximity of their traditional homeland to the major Portuguese colony of Luanda, the Mbundu have historically had the closest contact with the ruling elite, and to this day the Angolan government continues to be dominated by Mbundus who view Luanda as their official capital. The Bakongo, on the other hand, have always had more in common with their ethnic brothers in the Belgian and French Congos (modern-day Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville), and the fluidity of the northern border region of Angola has resulted in the frequent intermingling of these populations, inevitably encouraging both neighbouring countries to interfere in Angola's internal affairs. The largest single ethnic group – the Ovimbundu – remains to this day the most marginalized of the three, basing its power in the central highlands of Huambo and Bié, and viewing the Luanda elite – in particular the 'mestiços' (mixed race) and 'assimilados' ('assimilated Angolans') – with intense mistrust.[12] This three-way ethnic split in

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[9] Due to the extended war in Angola and the enormous displacement of the population into the cities (principally Luanda and Benguela) and neighbouring countries (Zaire and Zambia), there are no accurate population figures, and the most recent figure – 10.1 million in July 2000 (CIA World Fact Book) – is at best an estimate. In 1956, the Portuguese state estimated the Angolan population at 4,369,500 (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1950-1962), p.1), and by 1979 this had grown to 6 million (Ortiz, op. cit., p.206), finally topping 11 million in the late-1990s.

[10] The eight principal ethnic groups in Angola are (in order of size) the Ovimbundu, Mbundu, Bakongo, Lunda-Chokwe, Nganguela, Ovambo, Nyaneka-Humbe & Herero. The mestiço ('mixed race') can also be considered a separate ethnic group, and there are many other sub-groups and even undocumented tribes living in the remoter regions of Angola.

[11] These figures (taken from the US Library of Congress website, http://www.loc.gov/) are from 1988 and are therefore representative of the Angolan population during the period of the Cuban intervention.

[12] Assimilação ('Assimilation') was a policy adopted by the Portuguese authorities to 'assimilate' indigenous Africans into the Portuguese colonial population, and involved applicants renouncing all cultural and ethnic ties with Africa and fully embracing the Portuguese culture, customs and language. 'Assimilados' were therefore natural targets for the Angolan nationalists who viewed them with a hatred which was out of all proportion to their numbers (by 1950 they represented only 0.25% of the population [John Marcum, The Angolan Revolution: The Anatomy of an Explosion (1950-1962) (Vol. 1), The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), USA, 1969, p.5, n11]).

Angola was to prove crucial in the struggle for independence which developed during the 1960s, and would eventually lead to the creation of three separate independence movements which – although they each professed to represent all the Angolan people – drew the bulk of their support from one of the three major ethnic groups (see below).

**Brief history of Angola, pre-1950**

Like so many African countries, Angola is essentially a false construct, and was pieced together in the late 19th Century from various Portuguese colonies along the south-west African coast, principal among them Luanda, Benguela and Cabinda.[13] Since the late 15th Century Portugal's principal interest in Africa had been the export of slaves, ivory and precious stones, and as a result of this the bulk of the Portuguese colonies clung to Angola's 1,000-mile-long coastline, some parts of the interior remaining relatively undiscovered until the 1920s.[14] Education of the indigenous population was left to the waves of American missionaries who arrived in Angola in the early 20th century, and the effective division of Angola between three principal religious groups – the Baptists in the north, the Methodists in the Luanda hinterland, and the Congregationalists in the central highlands – exacerbated the ethnic tensions already existing between the Bakongo, Mbundu and Ovimbundu.[15] Two major waves of Portuguese immigrants – in the 1910s during the First Republic and again in the 1950s during the Salazar dictatorship – massively boosted the economic development of Angola, although this was achieved at the expense of the indigenous population

[13] The borders of Angola were not finally set until 1926 when a dispute with South Africa over Angola's southern border with South Western Africa (Namibia) was resolved.

[14] During the 17th Century Luanda became one of the principal slave-trading ports in Africa, annually exporting between 5,000 and 10,000 slaves. So important was the slave trade to Luanda, that following the abolition of slavery prominent figures in the Luanda elite – most notably Dona Ana Joaquim whose palace stills stands on the Rua Direita – secretly continued to deal in slaves until the late 19th century, smuggling them out in barrels of palm oil in the most barbaric conditions.

[15] David Birmingham, Frontline Nationalism in Angola and Mozambique, James Currey, London, 1992, p.24. The effect of these missionaries in educating a new indigenous elite cannot be understated: the fathers of all three leaders of Angola's principal independence movements were prominent figures in one of the religious groups (Neto's father was a Methodist priest, Roberto's father was a prominent Baptist, and Savimbi's father was a Congregationalist minister who preached along the Benguela railway line).

which was institutionalised into annual forced labour.[16] Following the discovery of vast petroleum reserves off the coast of Cabinda in 1955, Angola underwent an economic boom which by the early 1970s had converted it into the jewel of the Portuguese Empire, producing huge revenues for the Lisbon government from the export of petroleum, diamonds and coffee.[17] Boosted by the Angolan revenue, Salazar rejected all calls to decolonise Portugal's African empire – crushing all discussion of Angolan autonomy or independence – and thus it was not until the early 1950s that the first organised resistance started to emerge in Angola.

## The birth of Angolan nationalism (1950-1961)

Inspired by the wave of nationalism which swept Africa following the Second World War,[18] in the early 1950s the first nationalist movements began to appear in Angola, and by the time of the Second All African Peoples' Conference in Accra in January 1960, two principal movements had emerged. The first was the UPA (União das Populações de Angola, Union of the Angolan Peoples) led by Holden Roberto, a Bakongo who had spent most of his life outside Angola and who was at the time one of President Nkrumah's protégés.[19] Roberto drew the majority of his support from northern Angola's Bakongo population (hence his organisation's original name, Union of the *Northern* Angolan Peoples [UPNA]),[20] although his Foreign Minister – Jonas Savimbi – was a prominent Ovimbundu (and would later resign his post to

[16] Massive immigration during the 1950s boosted the white population from 80,000 to nearly 200,000 by 1961, and by the time of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal (25 April 1974) there were more than 300,000 Portuguese in Angola, the vast majority of them fleeing to Portugal in the months immediately preceding independence.

[17] By 1973 Angola was the fourth largest coffee-exporter in the world, and the third largest of diamonds, producing an average US$70 million in revenue for the Portuguese government every year (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1950-62), p.7). Between 1960 and 1974 the Angolan economy grew at a robust 7% per year.

[18] The event which sparked off this wave of African nationalism was a march by black ex-servicemen in front of the Governor's castle in Gold Coast (later Ghana) in 1948. Initially the authorities refused to give way, but they were eventually forced to give in to African demands, and on 6 March 1957 Ghana became the first African country to gain independence from Britain (Birmingham, op. cit., pp.4-5).

[19] Roberto's father had fled Angola in 1925 – when Roberto was only two – and settled in Léopoldville (Kinshasa), raising his son there. Thus when Roberto entered Angola with an invading force in July 1975, it would be his first return to the country for fifty years.

[20] There is some disagreement over when exactly the UPA was founded. Roberto (in interview with author, Luanda, 27 May 1988) claims that the UPNA was founded around 1954, whereas most sources date its foundation in July 1957, the change to 'UPA' only being adopted at the Accra Conference.

found Angola's third liberation movement, UNITA [see Chapter 1]). Also present at the Conference was Roberto's principal rival in Angola, the MPLA (Movimento Popular para a Libertação de Angola, Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), an organisation Roberto viewed with suspicion for its more cosmopolitan membership.[21] Formed from a disparate collection of radical nationalist movements (including the Angolan Communist Party), the MPLA was headed by Agostinho Neto – a rising Mbundu nationalist figure and poet – and contained many important intellectuals who would later play a prominent role in Angolan history, among them Viriato da Cruz, Lopo do Nascimento and Lúcio Lara.[22] At this stage, there was little to tell the Angolan movements apart – both expounding a nationalist, non-racial and anti-imperialist ideology – but over the next few years the strong Marxist ideology of many of the MPLA's leading members would push the movement into the socialist camp, while Roberto's growing ties with the emerging Kinshasa elite would effectively ally him with the West.[23]

**The outbreak of the fighting in Angola, January-March 1961**

The wave of African nationalism which swept into southern Africa in 1960 was to provide the spark that set off Angola's thirteen-year insurgency, and was triggered by the announcement in January that the Belgian Congo would rapidly be granted independence, and then further fuelled by the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 'Winds of Change' speech to the South African parliament on 3 February, which promised speedy independence for Britain's colonies in Africa.

[21] Roberto (in interview) recalled meeting the MPLA delegates for the first time at this conference, remarking unfavourably on the high proportion of whites and mestiços among them.

[22] The MPLA grew from various organisations, starting with the Partido Comunista de Angola (PCA) which was formed by Viriato da Cruz and Mário de Andrade in October 1955. In January 1956 the PCA merged with other radical Angolan groups to form PLUAA (Partido da Luta Unida dos Africanos de Angola, Party of the United Struggle of the Africans of Angola), and on 10 December 1956 this then became the MPLA, a name it would keep until the 'Sovietization' of the Angolan state in the late 1970s when it was renamed the MPLA-PT ('Partido Trabalhador', 'Workers Party'). Neto became effective leader in May 1959 when the founding president Ilídio Machado Alves was arrested by the Portuguese, and following his own arrest in June 1960 Neto was then elected Honorary President, eventually taking up the leadership of the MPLA in December 1962 after his escape from Portugal.

[23] There are abundant rumours that the UPA received funding directly from the CIA during the 1950s and 1960s, and although Roberto (in interview) has subsequently denied this, there is little doubt that prior to independence all the Angolan independence movements sought support, financial assistance

Only six weeks later South Africa's own bloody internal insurgency flared up with the Sharpeville massacre – during which South African police shot dead 69 Africans and wounded 176 others – and from then onwards the rest of southern Africa was engulfed in a wave of fighting which was to continue for the next three decades. With the independence of the Belgian Congo in June, both the MPLA and UPA set up offices much closer to Angola in Léopoldville (Kinshasa), and immediately drew up plans to launch their armed struggle the following year. The Portuguese authorities reacted to the increased tension in Angola with a clampdown on known activists, arresting Neto on 8 June and then killing and wounding over 200 Angolans in the disturbances which followed. Nevertheless, by the beginning of 1961 both movements were ready to launch their campaigns,[24] and that year three separate uprisings rocked Portuguese Angola, initiating a cycle of conflict which has continued almost unbroken to the present day. The first uprising – led by two mysterious figures called António Mariano & Kula-Xingu – blew up in the Kassanje cotton-growing area (eastern Malanje) in January, but was quickly put down with savage Portuguese reprisals, as many as 7,000 Angolans dying in the massacre which followed.

**The MPLA launches its insurgency, 4 February 1961**

Of more lasting importance, however, was the bungled launch of the MPLA's guerrilla struggle one month later in Luanda. Seeking to capitalise on the presence of a large number of foreign journalists gathered in Angola to witness the arrival of the hijacked liner Santa Maria (the hijackers eventually sailed it to Recife in Brazil), on 4 February 250 MPLA guerrillas launched attacks on Luanda's main police station, government buildings and the infamous São Paulo prison. The Angolans were unable to release any of the 86 prisoners, however, and after heavy fighting they were forced

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and weaponry from wherever they could find it (including from countries which would later end up arming their enemies).

[24] On 9 November 1960 the MPLA issued orders to their commander in Angola – Comandante Paiba – to prepare an assault force of 250 men, and one month later an MPLA delegation announced at a press conference in the British House of Commons that the movement was about to launch its armed struggle in Angola. The UPA began planning its own armed insurrection in 1959, and was assisted by Nkrumah and Franz Fanon (who had made his name in the Algerian War which he helped the FLN [Front de Libération Nationale] launch in November 1954).

to withdraw, leaving behind at least seven Portuguese and 40 Angolan dead.[25] The raid failed to spark the general uprising they had hoped for, and the Portuguese responded with a ruthless counter-insurgency campaign in and around Luanda, arresting over 5,000 Angolans while Portuguese settlers were allowed to run amok in Luanda's musseques (shanty towns), killing dozens of black Angolans. Within weeks the MPLA had been driven out of Luanda – many of its operatives being killed or captured – and the remnants retreated to the relative safety of the Dembos, a mountainous area 100 miles northeast of Luanda which was an Mbundu heartland. There they set up the MPLA's '1st Military Region' for what was expected to be a protracted guerrilla campaign, and they were quickly surrounded by the Portuguese army which eventually stationed nearly 50,000 troops in the region, cutting the guerrillas off from their support in Léopoldville. With the Portuguese cordon intercepting all relief columns and correspondence, the situation in the Dembos became increasingly desperate, and by late 1964 the MPLA leadership would be forced to seek direct foreign assistance to help them reinforce the 1st Military Region, initiating the military alliance with Cuba (see Chapter 1).

**The UPA uprising in northern Angola, March 1961**

More serious than either the Kassanje or Luanda uprisings, however, was the third and final uprising launched by the UPA in northern Angola in March 1961 which immediately threw Angola's already unstable situation into chaos.[26] With separate uprisings planned to flare up simultaneously across the Bakongo's northern Angolan

[25] The ten 25-man teams were under the command of Comandante 'Paiba' (Domingo da Silva), and were given separate tasks according to specific instructions from 'Mula Ula'. their name for Neto (who was in prison at the time). On 1 February they gathered in a large house on the edge of Luanda, and split into groups to attack eight separate objectives: the prison, the police (Seventh Squad), the colonial administration (in charge of contracts and the tax on black Angolans), the post office, the aviation corps, the Indisma company (which supplied domestic labour to the Portuguese army) and the palace. The last group would patrol the city to warn of approaching reinforcements. The fighting started with an attack on the prison, but the Angolans were unable to release any of the prisoners as the Prison Governor had the only key and the Angolans were armed only with machetes and 'canhangulos' [primitive shot-guns] (Eloy Concepción, Por qué somos internacionalistas, Ediciones Políticas, Havana, 1987, pp.4-9 & Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1950-62), pp.126-129).

[26] In late 1960 Roberto had sent a thirteen-man team of UPA guerrillas (under Conego Manuel) to Luanda to prepare an urban uprising, but they were taken unprepared by the MPLA's pre-emptive strike and were quickly driven out of Luanda, heading for the Bakongo heartland in northern Angola where a full-scale uprising was being prepared (Roberto in interview).

heartland (see map), the UPA's leaders were hoping to spark a national uprising against the Portuguese, but they were to get more than they bargained for when the first clashes unleashed a wave of vengeful violence against the Portuguese settlers in Zaire and Uíge provinces, as many as a thousand of them being killed in the first few days. Attending a UN summit in New York at the time of the uprising, Roberto was greatly embarrassed (and shocked) by the savagery of the attacks on the Portuguese settlers, and news of UPA atrocities did much to undermine the Bakongo movement's legitimacy abroad whilst building sympathy for the Portuguese (whose own brutality received little press attention).[27] Graphic images of raped and mutilated settlers enflamed the Portuguese public's rage,[28] and the army launched a murderous counter-offensive into northern Angola, destroying dozens of villages and killing at least 20,000 Africans before the uprising was put down.[29] When the UPA's last stronghold at Pedra Verde (Uíge) fell to Portuguese forces on 20 September 1961, the surviving UPA guerrillas joined the 150,000 Bakongo refugees fleeing over the border into Congo-Kinshasa, and from late 1961 onwards they started to launch sporadic forays into northern Angola from military bases in the frontier area.

**The Congolese governments start to back UPA & MPLA as fighting breaks out between them, (late 1961 onwards)**

Almost immediately, however, UPA patrols started to clash with MPLA guerrillas attempting to infiltrate the Dembos from Léopoldville, and following the 'Ferreira

[27] Speaking of the massacre of Portuguese settlers, Roberto (in interview) said: "I said at the time that when you have a frying pan on a fire and you close the lid, it is going to explode. We were surprised because we didn't expect such a massacre, but we understood afterwards that the people were so... there was an explosion after so many years of exploitation. So they committed terrible acts... A popular revolution can't be controlled. A popular explosion can't be controlled. Something like 7,000 colonists were killed". Roberto also recalled, however, some of the savage Portuguese reprisals, describing the state of the thousands of refugees who fled into Zaire following the uprising. One man – whose face was horrendously swollen – had apparently shouted out 'Viva a liberdade!" ('Long live freedom!') as a Portuguese unit was marching past, and in retaliation the commanding officer had forced a padlock through his lips.

[28] See Horácio Caio, Angola: os dias de desespero, publisher not marked, Portugal, 1961, for some particularly graphic examples of these photos.

[29] Marcum (The Angolan Revolution (1950-62), p.141-149) notes many reports by American Protestant missionaries in the region of the wholesale massacre of the indigenous population, the Rev. David Grenfell later remarking that "the savagery of the Portuguese reaction kicked and scattered the fire until the whole of the north was ablaze". An estimated 20,000 Africans were killed in the first six months, rising to as many as 50,000 by the end of the Portuguese pacification campaign.

incident' on 9 October 1961 – when a UPA patrol captured and executed 21 MPLA guerrillas under Tomás Ferreira en route to the 1st Military Region – open warfare broke out between the MPLA and UPA, greatly hampering both movements' guerrilla campaigns against the Portuguese. Over the next three years their respective insurgencies limped on ineffectively, neither movement able to make effective headway against the massively-reinforced Portuguese garrison, and very quickly Angola's northern neighbours – Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville – were drawn into the conflict, arming and supplying their preferred candidates. Congo-Kinshasa had collapsed into chaos less than a week after being granted independence (30 June 1960), an army mutiny and the subsequent secession of the copper-rich Katanga province (later re-named Shaba) precipitating a military intervention by UN forces which lasted until January 1963. Once the secessionist leader Moïse Tshombe had been defeated, however – his Katangese forces fleeing west into Angola's Moxico province – two leading figures emerged in the Léopoldville political elite: Joseph Kasavubu (the Congolese President) and Joseph Mobutu (the Army Chief). Roberto's close relationship with both men ensured military and financial support for his cause, and under their patronage on 27 March 1962 Roberto re-branded the UPA, merging it with a Bakongo nationalist group to form the FNLA (Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola, National Front for the Liberation of Angola).

The desire to support the FNLA was more than fraternal, however, as the Léopoldville government had its eye on the oil-rich Cabinda enclave, and even while outwardly supporting Roberto's express desire to maintain the territorial integrity of Angola, it simultaneously gave secret military support to the nascent FLEC secessionist insurgency in Cabinda in the hope of strengthening its hand there. Congo-Kinshasa's bitterest regional rival Congo-Brazzaville – whose capital faced Léopoldville across the other side of the Pool – had similar ambitions on Cabinda, however, and following the expulsion of the MPLA from Léopoldville in November 1963, Alphonse Massemba-Débat's Marxist government invited the MPLA to set up its operations in Brazzaville. With territorial rivalry between the two Congolese governments growing ever fiercer, it was only natural that Brazzaville would choose to support the FNLA's bitterest rival, but the inevitable effect of this arrangement was

to exacerbate further the bitter divisions between the MPLA and FNLA, ensuring that in the long-term there would be no reconciliation between the two liberation movements. With a new rear-base in Dolisie (modern-day Loubomo) – only 25 miles from the border with Cabinda – the MPLA was able to launch its 2nd Military Region in January 1964,[30] and it continued in its efforts to send reinforcements to the stranded 1st Military Region in the Dembos, having frustratingly little success. In the meantime tensions between Brazzaville and Léopoldville continued to grow – fuelled by Massemba-Débat's decision to give military backing to the nascent rebellion in eastern Congo-Kinshasa – and by the time Che Guevara arrived for an official visit in January 1965, Brazzaville would be in fear of a retaliatory invasion by Léopoldville (see Chapter 1).

## South African involvement in Angola prior to 1974

South Africa's interest in Angola dates back as far as 1915 when South African forces conquered German South West Africa (Namibia), taking over its administration under a League of Nations mandate.[31] Namibia's 860-mile-long border with Angola ensured close cooperation between the South African and Portuguese governments, and following the outbreak of fighting in South Africa and Angola in 1960/61, these contacts were strengthened by the appointment of South Africa's first resident military representative (and Vice-Consul) in Luanda.[32] South Africa's occupation of

[30] The MPLA had attempted to launch a guerrilla front in Cabinda in January 1963, but it had had little success and following the move to Brazzaville in January 1964 an extraordinary *Conferência dos Quadros* ('Conference of Leading Cadres') was held which re-organised and then re-launched the 2nd Military Region, again with little success. Frustration with the lack of the progress in Cabinda would be another prime factor in motivating the MPLA leadership to seek foreign military assistance from Che Guevara in 1965 (see Chapter 1).

[31] The new province was called the South West Africa Protectorate, and in 1920 the League of Nations designated it a 'C' Mandate territory to be governed by South Africa as an integral part of the British Commonwealth. Namibia's colonial status was reconfirmed after the Second World War by the International Court of Justice, but in 1968 this was overturned by the UN General Assembly which called for the territory's independence, a tortured process which was only completed in 1989 (Jim Hooper, Anthony Rogers & Ken Guest, Flashpoint! At the Front Line of Today's Wars, Arms and Armour Press, London, 1994, p.114).

[32] WS Van der Waals, Portugal's War in Angola, 1961-1974, Ashanti Publishing, Rivonia (RSA), 1993, p.134. Vice-Consul Ben de Wet Roos was appointed in November 1963 and succeeded on 2 December 1965 by Jannie Geldenhuys, a man who was to play a pivotal role in South Africa's two most important operations in Angola. Throughout Operation Savannah (1975-76) he would be Director of Operations (D Ops) of the SADF, and by the time of Operations Hooper and Packer (the Cuito Cuanavale campaigns of 1987/88) he would be Commander-in-Chief of the SADF (Jannie

Namibia was by then drawing fierce international criticism – the UN General Assembly repeatedly calling for the colony to be granted independence – and eventually in August 1966 a relatively-unknown liberation movement – SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation) – launched a guerrilla insurgency in the northern Ovambo region of Namibia which borders southern Angola. With SWAPO guerrillas operating back and forth across the Namibia-Angola border – and with the MPLA, FNLA and eventually UNITA spreading their insurgencies into Moxico and Cuando Cubango – the Portuguese army and the SADF (South African Defence Force) inevitably drifted into a military alliance, directly involving the South Africans in the fighting in Angola. Throughout the 1960s the alliance between Pretoria and Luanda gradually strengthened, and in the early 1970s both governments embarked on a joint scheme to build a hydroelectric dam on a part of the Cunene river which forms the western border between Angola and Namibia.[33] The installations at Calueque and Ruacaná gave the South Africans a direct economic stake in the outcome of the Angolan insurgency, and would ultimately provide the pretext for launching an invasion of Angola in late 1975 (see Chapter 4).

## Soviet involvement in Angola prior to 1974

Perhaps surprisingly – given the size of Soviet military intervention in Angola during the 1970s and 1980s – the Soviets initially showed only faltering interest in Angola's guerrilla insurgency, and throughout the 1960s provided unstable and at best lukewarm support for Angola's liberation movements. Attracted by the MPLA's openly Marxist sympathies, in late 1961 the Soviet Union started providing modest military aid – mostly in small fire-arms and supplies – to the MPLA's guerrillas. But with the OAU (Organisation of African Unity)[34] constantly changing its mind over

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Geldenhuys, A General's Story: From an era of war and peace, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1995, pp.37 & 52).

[33] The treaty to jointly develop a hydroelectric scheme on the Cunene river was signed on 21 January 1969, and over the next five years the South African government was to invest over 600 million rand in the scheme.

[34] The OAU is effectively an African United Nations, and was founded on 25 May 1963 to mediate in disputes between African states and to promote unity and solidarity in Africa. Membership has varied greatly due to political disputes between the African delegates, and its efforts to positively affect the Angolan War were to prove highly-unproductive, the organisation providing, withdrawing and then restoring support for all three independence movements on several occasions.

which Angolan movement it would officially recognise – and with growing suspicions about Neto's suitability to lead the MPLA – Soviet support for the MPLA was shaky, and on more than one occasion the Soviets would withdraw their assistance, only to tentatively restore it again at a later date. The Soviet Union had a troubled relationship with Africa during the 1960s, suffering the embarrassing collapse of several prominent African regimes it had been supporting,[35] and this eventually led the new Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev to re-assess Soviet objectives in sub-Saharan Africa, and to adopt a more geo-strategic approach to foreign policy. As a result Soviet involvement in Angola gradually tailed off in the early 1970s, and it would take the sudden decision by the Portuguese government to decolonise Angola (in April 1974) to revive Soviet interest in the region, and force them to resurrect their military alliance with the MPLA. Bereft of reliable support from the Soviets, the MPLA therefore cast its net wide in its search for military assistance – most notably obtaining military supplies from Yugoslavia – and this increasingly desperate search would ultimately bring them into direct contact with the Cubans, leading to the Brazzaville mission (see Chapter 1).[36]

**American involvement in Angola prior to 1974**

Following the Second World War, the USA had been one of the strongest champions of decolonisation – applying pressure on the European colonial powers to speed up the dismantling of their empires – and initially the Americans appeared to offer support for the Angolan insurgents, voting in December 1960 in favour of UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 which called on Portugal to start decolonising its empire.[37] Washington's relationship with Portugal was complicated, however, by the issue of the American military base on the Azores which it had been leasing from the

[35] In particular the Soviets were disheartened by the collapse of Ben Bella's regime in Algeria (19 June 1965), followed by Nkrumah's in Ghana (24 February 1966) and then Keita's in Mali (19 November 1968).

[36] Until the Soviet Union started massive arms shipments in late 1974, the MPLA's principal weapons supplier (aside from Cuba) was Yugoslavia, which never cut off its aid to Neto, even during moments of acute factionalism in the MPLA (author's interview with Paulo Jorge, Luanda, 8/9 October 1998).

[37] Only two countries voted against the Resolution – Spain & South Africa – and the American vote in favour was widely interpreted as a tentative gesture of support to the Angolan guerrillas by John F Kennedy's administration (John Stockwell, In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1978, p.51).

Portuguese since the early 1940s. Not wishing to inflame Portuguese sensibilities in the run-up to negotiations for an extension of the lease in late 1962, the Americans backed off from offering direct support to the Angolan liberation movements, and when Indian troops then invaded and occupied the Portuguese colony of Goa in December 1961, the American administration sprang to Portugal's defence, denouncing the invasion in the UN. Increasingly viewing Portugal – along with South Africa – as a necessary bulwark against the spread of Soviet influence in southern Africa, throughout the 1960s the Americans gradually strengthened their alliance with the Salazar regime – secretly allowing NATO aircraft and weaponry to be used in Angola (in contravention of their own guidelines) – until by the early 1970s they had come to rely on the Portuguese presence in Angola, leaving the USA poorly positioned when the sudden decision to withdraw was taken in April 1974 (see Chapter 3). The CIA is nevertheless rumoured to have given the FNLA some financial assistance, and although Roberto has subsequently denied this,[38] it is likely that his close relationship with Congo-Kinshasa's emerging dictator – Joseph Mobutu – ensured that he had some contact with the CIA (who were one of Mobutu's principal sources of foreign support).

**Summary of the situation in Angola by late 1964**

Once the Portuguese army and the Angolan guerrillas had settled down into their protracted and inconclusive struggle, therefore, there was little international interest in the Angolan insurgency – aside from Angola's immediate neighbours and the OAU – and the liberation movements had little choice but to extend their search internationally for foreign military assistance. By late 1964 – when Che Guevara started his three-month tour of Africa – the MPLA's search would have led to the first fledgling contacts with Fidel Castro's Revolutionary government in Havana which was by then renowned as one of the principal sponsors of revolution in the world.

[38] Roberto denies receiving any money from the CIA prior to 1974, although he does recount meeting with Senator John F Kennedy in 1960. Citing the speech Kennedy had given in 1956 (in which he defended the right of the Algerian people to rise up against the French), Roberto urged him to use his influence to gain American support for the Angolan liberation movements. Kennedy was allegedly responsive to Roberto's requests, but nothing more was to come of the meeting, and following his

With a track record of dozens of ongoing guerrilla operations across Latin America, Cuba seemed to be the ideal military sponsor for the MPLA, and during their first high-level meeting with Guevara in January 1965 the MPLA leadership would press for a programme of Cuban military aid which could help them resurrect their flagging insurgency. What neither Guevara nor Agostinho Neto realised at the time, however, was that the military alliance they were initiating would outlive them both, and would end up lasting – with some lapses – for more than twenty-five years.

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election to the presidency Kennedy actually strengthened the American-Portuguese alliance (Roberto in interview).

# Chapter 1

## The evolution of internationalism in the Cuban Revolution & the birth of the Cuban-MPLA alliance 1959-1965

The ideological evolution of the Cuban Revolution has been an improvised and volatile affair, and 'internationalism' is merely one of many ideologies which have periodically been adopted (and adapted) by the Revolutionary government to fit its changing political agenda. During the Revolution's first months, Cuban 'internationalism' was limited to attempts to overthrow other dictatorships in the Caribbean – most notably that of Gen. Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic where Cuba's ex-dictator had taken refuge – but as the Revolution grew more radical in late 1959 so too did this ideology, extending to include all dictatorships in Latin America, and eventually evolving into a fiercely anti-imperialist and anti-American call to arms. The explosion in Cuban internationalist missions was the result of the complex relationship between the two leading figures of the Cuban Revolution – Fidel Castro and Che Guevara – and the unusual mix of Castro's cold political pragmatism and Guevara's reckless idealism would prove a powerful combination, by the late 1960s converting Cuba from a docile satellite of the USA into one of the revolutionary centres of the world. Casting the net ever wider in the search for foreign allies, the Cuban regime would quickly come into contact with the leaders of Africa's revolutionary left, and this would ultimately lead to the first high-level contacts with the MPLA which was to receive one of several Cuban internationalist missions in Africa during the 1960s. Ultimately, however, Guevara's increasingly acrimonious relationship with Castro's Soviet patrons – coupled with the dispiriting failure of several internationalist missions abroad – would undermine his idealistic ideology, and lead in the end to its total abandonment in the late 1960s (see Chapter 2).

## Background to the Cuban Revolution, 1953-1959

Following Gen. Fulgencio Batista's seizure of power in Havana in March 1952, many opposition groups within Cuba had tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the Cuban dictator, but the most persistent challenge came from M-26-7 ('Movimiento del 26 de julio', 26th July Movement) which launched a quixotic attack against the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba on 26 July 1953. The attack was a fiasco, army reinforcements driving off the rebels after less than half an hour of fighting, and eight of the rebels and nineteen soldiers were killed, a further 61 rebels dying in the brutal round-up which followed. The leading member of this revolutionary movement – who survived the attack unscathed – was Fidel Castro Ruz, a charismatic and overpowering figure who came from a rich land-owning family in Oriente (eastern Cuba). The dramatic two-hour speech he gave at his trial in October 1953 – 'La historia me absolverá' ('History will absolve me') – made his international reputation as a leading revolutionary figure (and, it must be admitted, as a man who gave long speeches),[1] and under pressure from the American government in May 1955 Castro and his M-26-7 colleagues were released from the Isle of Pines' Model Prison, having served only eighteen months of their fifteen-year sentences. Regrouping in Mexico, Castro immediately began planning an invasion of Cuba with the aim of setting up a guerrilla insurgency in the remote Sierra Maestra (north and west of Santiago), and while in Mexico City he met Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, a young Argentine adventurer who had fled to Mexico from Guatemala the previous year.

## The Castro-Guevara relationship

The relationship which developed between Castro and Guevara over the following three and a half years was to fundamentally shape the Cuban Revolution, radicalising its objectives and pushing Cuba out of the American and into the Soviet sphere of influence, and Guevara very quickly emerged as Castro's preferred right-hand man. Guevara had been born and raised in Argentina, and from a young age acquired a

[1] Fidel Castro's longest recorded speech is fourteen hours (although the Cuban government archives are not sure exactly how many speeches he has given as Cuban leader), and he still holds the record for the longest speech to the UN General Assembly, lasting four and a half hours.

reputation for determination and almost puritanical zeal, becoming an accomplished rugby player despite suffering from the chronic asthma which was to dog him throughout his life. Leaving Argentina in July 1963 (only three weeks before the Moncada attack) on a journey across much of Latin America, Guevara gradually grew more radical in his political views – coming into contact with a mixture of Peronist, fascist and left-wing intellectuals – until by his arrival in Guatemala he had begun to adopt Marxist-Leninism as his ideological model.[2] Although never holding a post in the Arbenz government, in June 1954 Guevara attempted to organise a final stand in Guatemala City against the CIA-trained army of Castillo Armas, but this fizzled out scarcely after the fighting began, and Guevara was forced to flee to Mexico. It was there through the Soviet Nikolai Leonov – who had travelled back from the International Youth Festival in Moscow with Raúl Castro in mid-1953, shortly before the Moncada attack – that he was introduced to Fidel Castro.[3] Guevara was immediately taken with Castro whose immense personality and loquacity overpowered him, and by the end of the first meeting he had agreed to join the Cuban expedition.[4] The dramatic change from reckless adventurer to cold, ruthless revolutionary in the Sierra Maestra would quickly bring Guevara to Castro's attention, and lead to his appointment as the first 'comandante' (the guerrillas' highest rank).[5]

## The Cuban Revolutionary War, 1956-59

Castro's planned uprising in Cuba was initially an unmitigated disaster, however, the crossing from Tuxpán (Mexico) to Oriente (Cuba) turning into a gruelling week-long

[2] See Jon Lee Anderson, Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life, Bantam Press, London, 1997, pp.71-127, for a detailed account of Guevara's political radicalisation during his journey through Latin America.

[3] Cuban contact with the Soviets prior to 1960 is discussed below.

[4] According to oft-repeated legend in Cuba, Guevara joined Castro's expeditionary force under the condition that should the Revolution triumph – and should he live to see the day – Guevara would then be allowed to take the struggle beyond Cuba's shores, most notably to his home country of Argentina. Whether Guevara did actually demand this from Castro – or whether it is merely a convenient re-working of history to fit the Cuban regime's political agenda – remains open to question.

[5] Guevara's ruthless streak emerged early on in the Sierra Maestra when he volunteered to execute the first suspected informer captured by the guerrillas. He shot the man through the head with little emotion, and noted clinically in his diary where the entry and exit wounds were, and also that he now owned the man's possessions. During the Revolutionary War Guevara gained a reputation for ruthlessness with the enemy, and following the capture of Havana he would have to be restrained by

ordeal for the 82 men crammed on board, and by the time the crippled yacht ran ashore at Los Cayuelos (Oriente) on 2 December 1956, the series of uprisings timed to coincide with the landing had already gone ahead and been crushed. Abandoning the yacht with many of its supplies still on board – Guevara later described the landing as 'more of a sinking' – the guerrilla force moved inland, and three days later it was ambushed by the Cuban army near Alegría de Pío, only 22 guerrillas surviving the hail of bullets and subsequent round-up to escape into the Sierra Maestra. It was at this stage, however, that Castro showed his remarkable tenacity and his peculiar ability to convert defeat into victory – something which would become a hallmark of his political career – and over the following two years he gradually built his risibly small band into a competent guerrilla army, by mid-1958 posing a direct challenge to Batista's power in Cuba. With Castro's international profile continuing to grow – in particular after Herbert Matthews visited the Sierra Maestra in February 1957 and reported on the guerrillas' activities in The New York Times – relations with the urban leadership of M-26-7 grew strained, and following the failure of a General Strike in April 1958 a prolonged power struggle broke out between the Sierra and Havana leaderships, encouraging Castro to look towards the Soviets as an alternative source of support (see below). When a last-ditch offensive by Batista in late 1958 failed to dislodge the guerrillas, Castro was able to send his most trusted commander – Che Guevara – to capture Santa Clara, and his capture of the city on 29 December effectively cut the island in half, forcing Batista to flee Cuba two days later.

**The radicalisation of the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1962**

The overthrow of Batista was greeted with jubilation in Havana whose population hoped it would bring an end to the corruption and gangsterism which had come to characterise Cuban political life, and at this stage they expected a liberal-democratic revolution which reflected the guerrillas' broad political and social base of support. Once the Revolution started to lurch towards the left, however – in particular after the take-over by Fidel Castro and the Cuban Communists in October 1959 – many of those who had supported the overthrow of Batista would turn against the Revolution,

Castro (under international pressure) from shooting too many of the ex-Batista officers who fell into his

some of Castro's former comrades setting up their own insurgency in the Sierra Escambray (south of Santa Clara). The first four years of the Cuban Revolution were therefore dominated by the steady radicalisation of the government amidst growing opposition within Cuba itself, and can be divided into five distinct phases:[6]

**1) January-October 1959: Democratic-liberal phase**

- Broad-based political support for Revolution across Cuba
- Castro calls for overthrow of other dictatorships in the Caribbean

**2) October 1959-September 1960: Nationalist phase**

- Radicalisation starts with removal of liberal government and take-over by Castro & the Cuban Communists
- Expropriation of businesses & confrontation with USA starts
- Birth of Cuban-Soviet military & political alliance

**3) September 1960-April 1961: Latin-Americanist & anti-imperialist phase**

- With 'First Declaration of Havana' (2 September 1960) Castro vows to fight colonialism, capitalism & imperialism in the world
- Tensions with the USA & Latin America start to grow

**4) April 1961-October 1962: Socialist phase**

- Castro declares socialist nature of Revolution as CIA-trained Cuban exile force invades at Bay of Pigs (17 April 1961)
- Following defeat of invasion force, tensions with USA reach boiling point

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hands.

[6] Taken from author's conversations with Cuban writer & dissident Octavio Guerra Royo, Havana, December 2000.

### 5) October 1962 onwards: Communist phase

- 'Cuban Missile Crisis' (22-28 October 1962), after which Cuba (with American promise not to invade) effectively falls into Soviet sphere of influence
- Start of serious disagreement between Castro & Guevara over Soviet patronage, leading to 1968 crisis (see next chapter)

**The confrontation with the USA & the birth of the Cuban-Soviet alliance**

Throughout these first five phases of the Cuban Revolution, the growing dispute between Cuba and the USA was to dominate the political agenda, eventually thrusting Cuba onto the world stage as a central point of Superpower confrontation. Prior to the Revolution, Cuba had been one of Washington's most obedient (and lucrative) satellite states in the Caribbean – its sugar-based economy entirely subordinated to American interests which continued to strengthen under a string of corrupt Cuban dictators. Following the guerrillas' seizure of power, however, it quickly became clear that the new Cuban government was seeking a direct confrontation with the USA, and even before the expropriation of American-owned businesses started in the summer of 1960 Washington had begun plotting the regime's downfall.[7] Castro had been planning his own show-down with the USA while still in the Sierra Maestra,[8] however, and in late July 1958 – five months before Batista fled Cuba – he initiated informal contacts with the Soviet Union. Meeting with Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (a well-known Cuban Communist) in the Sierra Maestra – less than a week after the Directory of M-26-7 had voted at a summit in Caracas to remove Castro as supreme leader – Castro set up direct dialogue with Moscow, probably wishing to shore up

[7] CIA agents began carrying out extensive sabotage operations in Cuba within months of Batista's fall, the most infamous of which involved blowing up the French ship La Coubre (which was transporting weapons and ammunition from Belgium for the newly-formed FAR) in Havana docks on 4 March 1960, killing more than 80 people. Two weeks later (on 17 March) President Eisenhower authorised the CIA to organise a Cuban-exile force to invade Cuba, this force eventually becoming 2506 Brigade which carried out the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion the following year.

[8] As early as June 1958 Fidel Castro wrote to his long-term confidant and lover Celia Sánchez declaring it was his "true destiny" to fight against the Americans to make them "pay dearly for what they are doing" (quotations from Tad Szulc, Fidel, A Critical Portrait, Coronet Books, Bungay (Suffolk), 1989, p.482).

support in his upcoming leadership battle. After two days of talks, Rodríguez left for Havana to confer with Blas Roca and Juan Marinello (two other Cuban Communists), and on 9 September he returned to the Sierra Maestra where he was to remain at Castro's side for the remainder of the war. Thus by the time Castro visited the USA in April 1959, he had already decided on a definitive break with the Americans and was looking towards the Soviet Union for possible support.[9]

## The Communist 'coup' in Cuba, October 1959

The real birth of the Soviet-Cuban alliance came in October 1959, however, when in what was effectively a secret coup the Castro brothers and Cuban Communists took over the government, unleashing Cuba's radical nationalist phase. The acting president Manuel Urrutia and the remaining liberal members of the government were easily removed in early October, but when Castro then attempted to appoint his loyal but ineffective brother Raúl as Chief of MINFAR (Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces) he provoked a mutiny in the army. Hubert Matos – an important M-26-7 cadre and veteran of the Revolutionary War – resigned in protest, refusing to serve under a Communist, and the Army Chief Camilo Cienfuegos was sent to Camagüey to arrest him. Cienfuegos spoke with Matos instead, however, and as he flew back to Havana on 28 October his aircraft disappeared, several weeks of intensive searching producing no trace of wreckage or debris.[10] Matos was immediately arrested and imprisoned (spending more time behind bars than even Nelson Mandela), and the government then lurched into its radical nationalist phase, leading rapidly to a formal Cuban-Soviet alliance. The arrival of future Soviet Ambassador Alex Alexiev in Havana only a week before Cienfuegos's disappearance suggests there may have been some form of Soviet complicity in the Communist take-

[9] Castro's behaviour during his visit to the USA shocked his Cuban sponsor Felipe Pazos who had first brought Castro to the Americans' attention by arranging the Herbert Matthews interview, and who had also arranged Castro's American tour in April 1959 (author's conversations with Octavio Guerra Royo, Havana, September 1999 & December 2000).

[10] To this day 28 October is commemorated annually in Cuba as the 'Day of the Physical Disappearance of Camilo Cienfuegos', although many doubts still remain over whether his disappearance was actually an accident.

over,[11] and following talks with Alexiev the Cubans formalised their alliance with the Soviet Union, signing the first of many trade agreements in February 1960. Khrushchev's offer to buy Cuban sugar effectively pulled Cuba into the socialist economic bloc, and this inflamed American sensibilities, setting in motion the Soviet-American clash over Cuba which was to culminate in the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' of October 1962 (see below).

**History of internationalism, prior to 1959**

Against this backdrop of brewing confrontation with the USA and a burgeoning alliance with the Soviet Union, Che Guevara developed his own particular model of internationalism, its evolution mirroring the rapid radicalisation of the Cuban Revolution after October 1959. Although there are countless previous examples in history of foreigners fighting for other countries for ideological reasons – the Greek War for Independence (1821-32) standing out in particular – the internationalist ideology which inspired Guevara did not come into existence until 1848 when Karl Marx published The Communist Manifesto, a revolutionary statement of his and Friedrich Engels' political beliefs which ended with the provocative call: "Workers of the world, unite!" Urging all proletarians to shed their nationality and fight for the common cause against their oppressors, Marx's 'Proletarian internationalism' was later refined by Lenin who introduced the concept of the struggle against imperialism, producing the Marxist-Leninist ideology which was to dominate the vast majority of African liberation movements after the Second World War. Incorporating the concepts of international solidarity with workers of other nations and the constant struggle for revolution, 'Proletarian internationalism' has been described by one Soviet writer as "Marxist-Leninist theory in all of its constituent parts".[12] The emergence of a Soviet-controlled socialist bloc after the Second World War further

[11] It is also rumoured that around the time of Cienfuegos's disappearance there was a secret meeting between Fidel, Raúl and the Soviet deputy premier Anastas Mikoyan on Ernest Hemingway's yacht, although what would actually have been discussed is open to speculation.

[12] O Drugov, Proletarian Internationalism: yesterday and today, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow, 1984, p.5. Drugov describes 'Proletarian internationalism' as "a principle for practical action, [incorporating] above all the solidarity and unity of workers of different nations and nationalities as they act together in the struggle for their class interests, and also the unity of the

strengthened the concept of international solidarity between outwardly socialist states, and this gained even greater significance as the Cold War effectively divided the world into spheres of Western and Soviet influence.

## Guevara's first 'Caribbean' internationalist phase, February 1959-September 1960

The kind of internationalism Che Guevara envisioned when setting up an informal 'Liberation Department' at the Department of State Security in February 1959 – less than a month after occupying Havana – was of a more localised Caribbean kind, however, and had more in common with Simón Bolívar than Karl Marx. Although the Cuban regime would subsequently claim that internationalism has deep roots in Cuba – stretching as far back as the Indian chieftain Hatuey who fought against the Spanish in Cuba in the early 16th Century – the 'internationalism' practised by such folk heroes as the Dominican Máximo Gómez (a leading general of the Cuban War of Independence [1895-98]) was of a predominantly Hispanic kind, and was exclusively concerned with the struggle for independence in Spain's remaining American colonies. Likewise, the 10,000 or so Cubans who volunteered to fight in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) were motivated as much by ties to their Hispanic motherland as they were by the political ideologies of the time. Thus at the start of the Revolution Cuba's internationalist vision did not extend beyond the Caribbean basin, and it was exclusively concentrated on overthrowing neighbouring dictatorships, most notably in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Panama. The *ad hoc* nature of Guevara's 'Liberation Department' inevitably led to poor organisation and co-ordination, however – precipitating several unauthorised (and unsuccessful) attempts by Cuban guerrillas to invade neighbouring countries[13] – and after the Communist take-over in October 1959 the 'Liberation Department' was

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international working class and its vanguard – the Marxist-Leninist parties – as they struggle for the emancipation of each nation, for the building of a new society".

[13] The first – involving the landing of 80 Cubans in Panama on 24 April 1959 – was acutely embarrassing for Fidel Castro who was on a tour of the USA and Canada at the time, and he publicly offered Cuban help in capturing the insurgents. Another 22-man Cuban invasion force bound for Nicaragua was apprehended before it left Cuba on 7 May 1959; again the operation had been planned without the knowledge or sanction of the Cuban regime (Jorge I Domínguez, To Make a World Safe

reorganised and put under the control of the Deputy Chief of MININT (Ministry of Interior), Manuel Piñeiro Losada (known simply as 'Barba Roja' ['Red Beard']).[14]

Under Guevara's supervision 'Barba Roja' set up 'MOE section' ('M' was the secret digit for the department within MININT, 'OE' stood for 'Operaciones Especiales' [Special Operations]) to organise and direct all guerrilla training programmes in Cuba, thus preventing any further embarrassments. Headed by Orlando Pantoja 'Ola' and his deputy Úlises Estrada, MOE set up training schools for various Latin American liberation movements in Cuba and helped them prepare their insurgencies, with much input from Guevara himself.[15] MOE's first coordinated operations in Latin America were 'Operación Matraca' – a guerrilla insurgency in Peru to be led by the poet Héctor Béjar – and 'Operación Segundo Sombra' – a "*guerrilla madre*" (guerrilla centre) in northern Argentina which Guevara secretly hoped to command himself.[16] The strategy to be adopted by the Cuban-trained guerrillas was Guevara's own brainchild – 'foquismo' – a radically-new model of guerrilla warfare drawn from his experience fighting against Batista's army in the Sierra Maestra. Published in April 1960 under the title La guerra de guerrillas ('Guerrilla warfare'),[17] Guevara's ideology was a major departure from the established Marxist-Leninist model for revolution, and laid down three ground-breaking principles:

1) Popular forces can win a war against a conventional army
2) It is not always necessary to have to wait for a revolutionary situation to arise – this can be created by the guerrilla forces themselves

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for Revolution: Cuba's foreign policy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1989, pp.117-118).

[14] 'Barba Roja' had been one of Raúl Castro's former 'Second Front' aides during the Revolutionary War, and gradually rose in prominence in the Cuban government, eventually being appointed Chief of the Americas Department on the PCC's Central Committee in December 1974.

[15] Úlises Estrada recalls that: "We had to discuss everything concerning guerrilla or clandestine movements with Che, although the overall chief was Fidel" (author's translation from William Gálvez, El Sueño Africano de Che: ¿Qué sucedió en la guerrilla congolesa?, Casa de las Américas, Havana, 1997, p.33).

[16] Gálvez, op. cit., pp.34-35. The code-name for the operation was taken from Ricardo Güiraldes's famous gaucho Bildungsroman, 'Don Segundo Sombra' (1926).

[17] 'Foquismo' was originally sketched out in an article in 1959, and after its publication in 'La guerra de guerrillas', it was adapted by Guevara into what was effectively a manual for guerrilla warfare: Guerrilla Warfare: A Method, published in September 1963.

3) In the underdeveloped countries of Latin America, rural areas are the best battlefields for armed struggle

Providing aspiring revolutionaries with what has been described as a "how-to manual for guerrilla warfare",[18] Guevara's La guerra de guerrillas based its military strategy on infiltrating a small guerrilla cell – or 'foco' – into a remote rural area, after which it would gradually build itself up with recruits and supplies from the local population. Steadily it would increase its operations in the area until it was ready to send out further 'focos' across the country to spread the insurgency – just as Castro's army had done in the Sierra Maestra. Having been one of only 22 survivors of the original landing force in December 1956, Guevara had witnessed a pitifully small guerrilla band grow into a formidable army which eventually overthrew a powerful military dictatorship, and he believed that this same model could be applied successfully to the rest of Latin America. Unfortunately for Guevara, however, 'foquismo' had several fundamental flaws – not least of which was its open publication which enabled the CIA and Latin American dictatorships to prepare effective counter-measures[19] – and throughout the early 1960s he would grow increasingly frustrated with MOE's failure to set up a single successful 'foco', eventually forcing him to step in and command one himself (see 'Congo mission' below).

**The 'Anti-imperialist' phase & the search for new allies, Sept. 1960-April 1961**

With the confrontation between Cuba and the USA growing daily throughout 1960 – expropriations of American-owned businesses triggering tighter American economic sanctions against Cuba – Castro's government became ever more radical, and on 2 September 1960 it issued what became known as the 'First Declaration of Havana'.

[18] Thomas C Wright, Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution, Praeger, 1991, p.80. In Guevara's words the Cuban Revolution was "a modifier of old dogmas", reflecting his belief that it challenged the standard Soviet model for social revolution championed by the majority of the Moscow-controlled Latin American Communist parties (quoted in Andrew Sinclair, Guevara, Collins, London, 1970, p.43).

[19] Ironically, the closest (and arguably most successful) students of his Guerra de Guerrillas were the CIA who developed counter-insurgency tactics directly in response to Guevara's specific guerrilla model. In October 1961 they ran the first 'Inter-American Counter-revolutionary War Course' at Argentina's Escuela Superior de Guerra (Senior Military Academy), and over the following years were to develop highly-sophisticated tactics for crushing 'foquismo' (Anderson, op. cit., p.522).

Proclaiming Cuba's determination to fight colonialism, capitalism and 'American neo-imperialism' in the world, it was little less than a declaration of war on the USA and its interests, and led Washington to speed up its plans for an invasion by CIA-trained Cuban exiles. With Cuba's allies in the region starting to desert Castro, the search for new allies outside the Western hemisphere became more imperative than ever, and in October 1960 Guevara was sent on a two-month tour of Communist bloc countries to drum up support for the Cuban Revolution. Guevara had already made a highly-publicised (and successful) tour of northern Africa and Asia in late 1959, and his growing international profile rapidly converted him into Castro's unofficial roving ambassador, enabling him to set up contacts with many of the world's leading revolutionaries.[20] The friendship Guevara developed with Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser opened up a gateway into Africa – encouraging close ties between Cuba and the left-wing liberation movements there[21] – while his meetings with Chinese premier Mao Zedong influenced him to turn away from the Soviet political model and move towards the Chinese. Boosted by Guevara's new international contacts, in early 1961 MOE expanded its operations dramatically, and over the next four years it would extend its guerrilla training programme to an ever-increasing number of African revolutionary movements, gradually converting Cuba into the guerrilla training-centre of the world (see below).[22]

[20] Guevara left for his first three-month tour of Africa and Asia on 12 June 1959, visiting Egypt, India, Indonesia, Yugoslavia & Ceylon (Sri Lanka). During his trip met with Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egyptian president), Sukarno (Indonesian president), Marshal Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavian president) and Jawaharlal Nehru (Indian Prime Minister), setting up diplomatic & economic relations with all of them. During his 1960 trip, he met at length with Mao Zedong (Chinese premier) and Nikita Khrushchev (Soviet premier).

[21] During his time in Egypt it is likely that Guevara met with representatives of the FLN (Front de Libération National) – the Algerian liberation movement – setting up a military alliance which would expand dramatically following Algerian independence in July 1962. There appears to have been no direct contact with either the MPLA or FNLA at this stage, however, both of which were in the last stages of planning for their own insurgencies (see below for a discussion of the Cuban-MPLA relationship during the period 1959-65).

[22] Anderson (op. cit., p.534) notes that "[b]y the spring of 1962, Che was overseeing a campaign to recruit and organize guerrilla trainees from among the hundreds of Latin American students invited to Cuba on revolutionary scholarships".

## The Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961) & the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' (October 1962)

In April 1961 the confrontation between Cuba and the USA reached crisis-point with the long-expected invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, initiating the Revolution's fourth 'socialist' phase and impelling Cuba into an ever-closer military alliance with the Soviet Union. The CIA had secretly been training the invasion force in Guatemala throughout 1960, and was convinced that its arrival in Cuba would be sufficient to spark a national uprising against the Revolutionary government. But due to poor planning – and a behind-the-scenes power struggle between the Pentagon and the CIA[23] – the invasion turned into a fiasco, Castro's forces rapidly surrounding the stranded beachhead (which received almost none of the American air support it had been promised) and capturing nearly 1,200 of the invaders.[24] The Bay of Pigs was a disaster for the Kennedy administration, and was compounded by Castro's simultaneous declaration of the 'socialist nature of the Revolution',[25] confirming Cuba's ideological opposition to the USA. Washington retaliated by getting Cuba expelled from the OAS (Organization of American States) in January 1962, and this in turn prompted the 'Second Declaration of Havana' (4 February 1962), Castro decreeing that it was "the duty of every revolutionary to make revolution" and predicting that revolution in Latin America was 'inevitable'. With Cuba and the USA now in a state of undeclared war, Castro strengthened his military alliance with the Soviet Union, and in May 1962 accepted their offer to install ballistic missiles in Cuba.[26] Predictably, this move provoked a strong reaction from Washington, and when American U-2 spy planes photographed the suspected missile sites in Cuba in mid-October it sparked the 'Cuban Missile Crisis', bringing both superpowers to the brink of nuclear war.

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[23] See Appendix 2 for full discussion of the Pentagon-CIA clash during the Bay of Pigs.

[24] The CIA's decision to land 2506 Brigade at Playa Girón and Playa Larga in the Bay of Pigs is still utterly baffling, as there is scarcely a less suitable invasion site in the whole of Cuba. Although only about 100 miles from Havana (130 by road), the Bay of Pigs is surrounded on all sides by the largest swampland area in Cuba, the Ciénaga de Zapata, enabling Castro's army to cut off any invasion force by simply blocking the only main road towards Santa Clara. With no air support and unable to move their limited armour into the Cuban interior, the exile force was effectively cut off in the Bay of Pigs, and it was only a matter of days before its commanders were forced to surrender.

[25] Castro went further in December 1961 declaring he was a Marxist-Leninist and would remain so until his death.

On 22 October President Kennedy issued an ultimatum to the Soviets, ordering them to withdraw their missiles within one week and imposing an immediate naval blockade on Cuba. The Soviets initially refused to back down – fuelling fears of an American invasion of Cuba and a possible nuclear holocaust – but after a week of behind-the-scenes negotiations on 28 October a secret deal was struck between Washington and Moscow, the Soviets agreeing to withdraw their missiles in return for an American commitment not to invade Cuba.[27] The peaceful resolution of the crisis was greeted with worldwide relief, but the news caused outrage in Havana which had not been informed of the deal, Castro allegedly smashing a mirror with his fist when he heard the news (Guevara later declared that if he had been in control of the missiles he would have fired them off).[28] The Soviet climb-down was viewed as a betrayal by the Cuban leadership, convincing Guevara of what he had suspected for some time – that the Soviet Union was merely another imperialist power seeking to use Cuba as a pawn – and encouraging him to look towards alternative sources of support (for example China and Yugoslavia). Castro on the other hand took a more pragmatic view, and while angry at being left out of the negotiations (something he would ensure did not happen again during the Angolan War) he recognised that not only had the Soviet deal removed the principal threat to his regime's survival – an American invasion – but also that without the Soviets' continuing economic support Cuba stood little chance of surviving the American economic stranglehold. From this point onwards, therefore, Castro and Guevara started to diverge ideologically, weakening Guevara's position in the Cuban government and eventually forcing him to leave Cuba altogether.

## The break between Castro and Guevara, 1963 onwards

Conscious of their damaged relationship with Castro, in April 1963 the Soviets invited the Cuban leader to visit the Soviet Union where they fêted him for 37 days,

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[26] Anderson, op. cit., p.527.

[27] The outcome of the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' was widely interpreted at the time as an American victory, but unknown to the public Kennedy had also agreed to a second concession – the removal of the USA's Jupiter ballistic missiles from Turkey – in order to secure the Soviet climb-down. This was kept secret, however, and would prove to be a miscalculation by Khrushchev whose support in the Soviet Union rapidly evaporated following the Missile Crisis.

promising huge economic and technical aid packages to compensate for the previous year's humiliation.[29] By the time Castro returned to Cuba in June the Soviet-Cuban relationship had been repaired, and he immediately announced that Cuba would now concentrate on sugar production (for export to the Soviet Union), forgoing the rapid industrialisation plans which Guevara as Minister of Industry had been developing for the previous two years. In fairness to Castro, Guevara's economic experiments – designed to create the 'Hombre Nuevo' ('New Man') free of materialism, prejudice and greed – had been little short of disastrous, and the official shift back to the monoculture (sugar) which Guevara had so vehemently decried was a clear signal that he had fallen from favour with Castro. Increasingly at odds with the Soviet leadership, Guevara was in danger of becoming a liability for the Cuban government which was seeking to strengthen its alliance with Moscow, and it appears that many of Castro's supporters viewed Guevara's growing international profile as a potential threat to his grip on power. Bereft of a role in the new direction the Cuban Revolution was taking, the logical solution appeared to be for Guevara to leave Cuba and command one of the dozens of guerrilla 'focos' MOE had set up over the previous three years, but to his horror (and humiliation) not a single one of them had been successful,[30] and he quickly pinned his hopes on a 'guerrilla madre' which was due to be set up in his home country – Argentina – in mid-1963.

## Guevara's Argentine project – the Masetti column

The guerrilla 'foco' had been training in Algeria since January 1963, and was under the command of Ricardo Masetti, a former Argentine journalist who had become Guevara's principal go-between with the Algerian FLN, helping to smuggle arms to them in the early 1960s (see below).[31] Guevara's plan was for Masetti's column to

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[28] Anderson, op. cit., p.544.

[29] The jovial atmosphere which developed was captured on film when – at a lunch in Khrushchev's dacha outside Moscow – Castro and Khrushchev started having a snow-ball fight, the entire Soviet delegation eventually piling on top of Castro in the snow (see Red Chapters, a documentary by Opus Television for S4C International, Cardiff, 1999).

[30] Cuban-trained guerrilla 'focos' in Argentina (1958-63), Paraguay (1958-59) and Ecuador (1962) had been quickly discovered and crushed, usually as a result of poor preparation and intelligence by the guerrillas.

[31] Following the delivery of the arms (which had been captured during the Bay of Pigs invasion), Masetti and his companion Federico Méndez had stayed for several months at the FLN's HQ, training

infiltrate northern Argentina and set up a 'liberated area' which could then serve as a training ground for guerrillas from other Latin American liberation movements. Learning the skills of guerrilla warfare from first-hand combat experience against counter-insurgent forces (the only way to train a true guerrilla, in Guevara's opinion), guerrilla cadres could receive invaluable training *in situ* whilst simultaneously bolstering the core guerrilla force, before moving off to set up new 'focos' elsewhere in Latin America. In this way Argentina would become a 'guerrilla madre', irradiating out guerrilla 'focos' across Latin America until it was consumed by a 'Continental Revolution'. Guevara hoped to join Masetti once the 'liberated area' had been established, but once again the insurgency failed to take hold in Argentina, and by April 1964 the guerrillas had been surrounded and wiped out.[32] The failure of the Argentine operation was a further demoralising blow for Guevara – seriously calling into question the validity of 'foquismo' as a model for guerrilla warfare – and left him perilously short of options. With no other Latin American guerrilla operations expected to be ready for at least a couple of years[33] – and with his own role in the Cuban government diminishing by the day – Guevara was unsure what his next move should be, and it was in this predicament that he turned his attention to Africa, initiating the search for a guerrilla insurgency to command which would inadvertently result in the Cuban-MPLA military alliance (see below).

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the Algerians in the use of the American arms they had brought with them. Anderson (op. cit., p.538) notes that "[b]y the time they returned to Cuba, they had established close links with the grateful Algerian revolutionary leadership and its top military officers".

[32] Masetti's fate has never been satisfactorily determined. He was last seen heading into the mountains with dwindling supplies and was never heard of again. Some of his comrades believe he died of starvation, others that he committed suicide, whereas some Cubans maintain he was captured by Argentine security forces who murdered him for the thousands of American dollars he had on him in cash (Brig.-Gen. Abelardo Colomé Ibarra in Luis Báez, Secretos de Generales, Editorial Si-Mar (S.A.), Havana, 1996, p.24 & Úlises Estrada in Gálvez, op. cit., p.35).

[33] The most promising project – an ambitious plan to launch a guerrilla war in Bolivia which Guevara would eventually command himself in 1966/67 – was still in the planning stages, and for this reason one of Cuba's most promising agents Tamara Bunke Bider ('Tania') had been sent to Eastern Europe to begin constructing an elaborate cover for herself. Even by the most optimistic estimates the first guerrillas would not be infiltrated into Bolivia until late 1966, forcing Guevara to look elsewhere.

## Cuba's growing involvement in Africa, 1961-64

Since extending its guerrilla training programme to African liberation movements in 1961,[34] Cuba's contacts with African revolutionaries had expanded dramatically, and were principally channelled through the Cuban embassy in Conakry whose chargé d'affaires met regularly with them to discuss their policies and strategy, and offered military assistance when appropriate.[35] In December 1961 Cuba gave its first internationalist aid to an African country, sending an arms cache to the Algerian FLN (Front de Libération National) which was fighting for independence from the French,[36] and following Algerian independence in July 1962 Cuba set up its principal African military mission in Algeria, rapidly adopting it as the operational centre for Cuba's global guerrilla training programme.[37] Throughout 1963 the Cuban-FLN alliance continued to strengthen – with the arrival of Cuba's first internationalist medical brigade (comprising 53 doctors and nurses) in May – and following a surprise invasion of Algeria by Moroccan forces in October 1963, Cuba launched its first overseas military intervention.[38] In response to direct requests from Ben Bella, a contingent of 685 Cuban troops, 22 T-34 tanks and assorted artillery was hastily assembled and sailed to Algeria, completing its arrival by 29 October.[39] Although the

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[34] Among the first Africans to receive training in Havana were a group from the Zanzibar National Party under 'Field Marshal' John Okello. Okello would later go on to launch a successful and extremely bloody coup which overthrew the new Sultan of Zanzibar on 12 January 1964.

[35] Sometimes this assistance failed to materialise, however. For example, in August 1963 the Cuban chargé d'affaires in Conakry agreed to a request from the PAIGC for six months training in Cuba for five of its cadres, but Cuba never delivered on its promise (Piero Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors: Cuba's Contribution to Guinea-Bissau's War of Independence', Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 29, February 1997, p.47).

[36] The Cuban ship – Bahía de Nipe – returned with 76 wounded guerrillas for medical treatment in Cuba, as well as twenty Algerian children from refugee camps who were then educated in Cuba (Piero Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76: New Evidence from Cuban Archives', Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), Serial No. 6, Washington DC, 1996).

[37] High-level contacts between the Cuban and FLN leaderships continued throughout the 1960s, Ben Bella visiting Cuba in October 1962 (less than a week before the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' blew up). The following year Guevara visited Algeria to celebrate its first anniversary of independence (3 July 1963), and he was then accompanied on his return to Cuba by the vice-president Houari Boumedienne for the 26 July celebrations in Havana.

[38] A Cuban military mission was visiting Algiers at the time of the regional revolt in the Kabylia mountains (29 September 1963) which provided the pretext for the Moroccan invasion two days later.

[39] The Cuban force sailed in two ships – the Aracelio Iglesias and the Andrés González Lines – which left Havana on 10 October and 17 October respectively. An advance Cuban military mission was sent ahead to Algeria, and from 14 October it began planning a Cuban counter-attack which in the end was never carried out. The operation went ahead despite the fact that Cuba had only days before been severely lashed by Hurricane Flora, leaving much of the country in ruins. For a full account of the

Cuban troops never saw any action – Algeria and Morocco signed a cease-fire the very next day – the military operation was nevertheless a powerful demonstration of Cuban solidarity with the Algerian regime, and proved that Cuba had the capability to assemble and transport a sizeable military force to Africa in a remarkably short time.[40] The experience of the Algerian intervention would prove crucial to future Cuban interventions overseas, and would serve as a model for the far larger military intervention in Angola twelve years later (see Chapter 4).

**Guevara plans to launch a 'guerrilla madre' in Congo-Kinshasa, late 1964**

When Che Guevara turned his attention to Africa in late 1964, his strongest allies on the continent – Ben Bella and Nasser – were concentrated in the Maghreb, and he sought their help in setting up contacts with the nascent liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa, one country in particular catching his eye: Congo-Kinshasa. Following several army mutinies, a secessionist war in Katanga (Shaba) province and a series of corrupt dictators kept in power by mercenary forces, Congo-Kinshasa was by the mid-1960s the *cause celèbre* of Africa, and struck Guevara as the ideal place to launch an African 'guerrilla madre'.[41] Guevara was especially attracted by the country's strategic location at the centre of the African continent, its immense jungle-covered territory which offered almost unlimited protection for a guerrilla force, and its proximity to several potential allies (such as the newly-independent Zambia) which could provide rear-bases and military supplies. Unlike Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa also had the advantage of not being in the USA's 'backyard', and with a wave of nationalism sweeping into southern Africa in the early 1960s, the potential for extending Guevara's 'guerrilla madre' across the southern part of the continent seemed almost limitless. But Guevara's understanding of Congolese politics was almost non-existent, and his highly idealistic (and impractical) plans bore no relation to the realities of fierce ethnic rivalry in sub-Saharan Africa, fatally undermining his

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Cuban intervention in Algeria see Gisela García Blanco, La Misión Internacionalista de Cuba en Argelia (1963-1964), Imprenta de la Dirección Política Principal de las FAR (IDP), Havana, May 1990.

[40] The intervention also had a positive long-term effect on the FLN, the Cuban contingent remaining in Algeria for another six months to train a large contingent of its cadres, handing over the weaponry, armour and artillery it had brought from Cuba before withdrawing in May 1964.

[41] See Introduction for full background on Congo-Kinshasa.

chances of success. Nevertheless, after making one final trip to Moscow in November 1964 – which convinced him that it was time to leave Cuba[42] – Guevara pressed ahead with his plans, and in December he began a three-month tour of Africa to sound out his revolutionary allies on his plans to launch a 'Continental Revolution' in Africa itself.

## Guevara's tour of Africa, December 1964-March 1965

Before venturing into sub-Saharan Africa, Guevara first stopped off in New York to give a fiery speech to the UN General Assembly, hinting at his intended destination by declaring that "[we], the free men of the world, must be prepared to avenge the crimes committed in the Congo."[43] He flew on to Algiers to confer with his trusted ally Ben Bella, and then appears to have improvised his itinerary, flying back and forth across Africa for the next two months to meet nearly all the leading revolutionary figures in Africa at that time.[44] Guevara's first stop in Mali – where he met with President Modibo Keita, at the time one of the Soviets' staunchest African allies – did little to advance his plans for the Congo, but his second in Congo-Brazzaville was to prove far more significant, setting up military alliances which were to last for more than two decades.[45] On 2 January 1965 Guevara held talks with President Alphonse Massemba-Débat and Prime Minister Pascal Lissouba who were by then eager to forge a military alliance with the Cubans – fearing an invasion by the

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[42] Anderson, op. cit., p.616.

[43] Quoted in Michael Wolfers & Jane Bergerol, Angola in the Frontline, Zed Press, London, 1983, p.27.

[44] Guevara's African itinerary was probably as follows: 17 December 1964: flies to Algiers, meets with Ben Bella; 26 December 1964: flies to Mali, meets with President Modibo Keita; 1 January 1965: flies to Congo-Brazzaville, meets with Massemba-Débat and later Agostinho Neto; 8 January 1965: flies to Guinea-Conakry, meets with Sékou Touré, Amilcar Cabral and later with President Senghor on Senegalese border; 14 January 1965: flies to Ghana, meets with President Kwame Nkrumah; 24 January 1965: flies to Dahomey (modern-day Benin); 27 January 1965: returns to Algiers; 5 February 1965: when in Paris invited by Chinese Ambassador to visit China; 6 January 1965: flies to China for 4/5 day visit; c.10 February 1965: returns to Algiers; 11 February 1965: flies to Dar-es-Salaam, possibly via Zanzibar; 21 February: returns to Cairo; 24 February: gives controversial speech in Algiers; late February: returns to Cairo to accompany Nasser on election trail; 14 March: arrives back in Havana (from William Gálvez, op. cit., pp.36-56).

[45] My account of Guevara's meetings in Congo-Brazzaville is taken from two interviews with Jorge Risquet, one by David Deutchmann in Havana on 3 March 1989 (published in Changing the history of Africa, David Deutchmann (ed.), Ocean Press, Melbourne (Australia), 1989, pp.1-40) & another by Drumond Jaime & Helder Barber in Havana in August 1996 (published in Angola: Depoimentos para a História Recente, 1950-76, Istoé Comunicações, Lisbon, 1999, pp.330-346).

rival Léopoldville government at any moment – and they requested immediate military assistance from the Cubans to help train the Congolese militia and (if necessary) to defend Brazzaville itself. Guevara readily granted Massemba-Débat's request as it fitted in conveniently with his larger mission in the Congo, providing a nearby rear-base which could supply his guerrilla front with recruits, weaponry and supplies.[46] Whilst in Brazzaville, Guevara also took the opportunity to meet with an Angolan liberation movement with which Cuba had maintained loose relations since the late 1950s – the MPLA – and the talks which followed would transform their relationship, initiating their twenty-six year military alliance (see below).

## Cuban contacts with the MPLA, 1959-1965

The MPLA's first informal contacts with M-26-7 had started as far back as the late 1950s, through the Casa dos Estudantes do Império (Imperial Student House) in Lisbon. Initially set up as a hostel, help centre and meeting place for African students from the Portuguese Empire,[47] by the late 1950s the Casa dos Estudantes had become a hotbed of nationalist and revolutionary thought, and a major recruiting centre for the principal liberation movements in Portuguese Africa, among them the MPLA.[48] It was through the Casa dos Estudantes that the first tentative contacts with Castro's revolutionaries were made,[49] and these were followed in 1960 with more formal

[46] It is also likely that Brazzaville's support for the rebels in eastern Congo-Kinshasa – the CNL (Conseil National de Libération, National Liberation Council) – gave Guevara the idea to set up his 'guerrilla madre' in the CNL's area of operations, a decision he would come to regret by the end of the year.

[47] The Portuguese Empire in Africa at the time comprised Angola, Mozambique, Guiné (later Guinea-Bissau), the Cape Verde islands, and the islands of São Tomé & Príncipe (administered as one colony) in the Gulf of Guinea.

[48] Paulo Jorge, who from 1957-62 was a leading MPLA activist at the Casa dos Estudantes do Império, recalls one particular activist, Dr Arménio Ferreira, who politicised the African students who came for free consultations: "[Dr Ferreira] came two or three times a week, and during the consultations he would talk with us. And that way you could say he gradually awoke nationalism in each of us, and depending on which country you were from he would orientate you to the MPLA, or FRELIMO, or the PAIGC, or the CLSTP. This way I started to familiarise myself with the ideology of the MPLA, and to meet some men who were already working for the party abroad, among whom were Mário de Andrade, Marcelino dos Santos, etc., and then from that time a kind of group was formed which afterwards with this Dr Ferreira discussed the culture of Angola, with music and books" (author's translation from interview with Paulo Jorge, Luanda, 8/9 October 1998).

[49] Paulo Jorge (in interview) recalled reading and discussing Fidel Castro's 'La historia me absolverá' speech at the Casa dos Estudantes in 1957/58.

contacts via the Cuban embassy in Conakry.[50] From the start the Cuban Revolutionary regime gave considerable verbal support to the MPLA cause internationally,[51] and in 1962 it offered the MPLA a number of scholarships for Angolan students to study in Cuba, the first contingent arriving that summer. During their stay in Cuba the Angolans received higher education as well as basic military training, and among this first group were several men who would become prominent figures in the MPLA, such as Onanbwe (the Angolan who delivered the request for a Cuban military intervention in November 1975), and N'Dalu (until recently Angolan Ambassador to Washington DC).[52] Following the setting up of an MPLA office in Algiers in February 1963, MPLA cadres started receiving guerrilla training from Cuban and Algerian military instructors there,[53] and this programme continued on a small scale until Guevara's arrival in Brazzaville two years later. The turbulent first years of the Cuban and Angolan Revolutions had conspired to keep Cuban-MPLA

[50] Jorge Risquet (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.1) dates the first official contacts with the MPLA from 1962: "Some contacts were made with [the MPLA] around 1962... [The] comrades of the MPLA met with our diplomats [in Conakry]. We offered them the solidarity they were seeking, and moral support in their struggle against Portuguese colonialism". However, the recent publication by Lúcio Lara of a collection of MPLA documents from the 1960s clearly shows that contact was made between Cuba and the MPLA as early as March 1960. In a letter dated 14 March 1960 from Viriato da Cruz to Lúcio Lara & Amílcar Cabral, da Cruz notes that "I had contact with an official Cuban delegation. The contacts were fruitful". Unfortunately he gives no further details in the letter, concluding that "given the nature of the results, I think it better I tell you nothing by letter". Lúcio Lara's reply four days later merely notes: "The Cuban contact is good. I don't think it's worth you giving me the details" (author's translation from Lúcio Lara, Um Amplo Movimento... Itinerário do MPLA através de documentos e anotações, Vol. 1 (até fev. 61), Luanda, 1998, pp.309 & 319). Colin Legum & Tony Hodges (After Angola: The War Over Southern Africa, Rex Collings, London, 1976, p.20) also mention Guido Sánchez as one of the first men Cuba sent out to Ghana in the early 1960s to make contact with anti-Portuguese insurgent leaders in exile there. They suggest that the Cuban government's interest in meeting Portuguese-speaking revolutionaries was sparked by their contacts with members of Brazil's left-wing opposition.

[51] In September 1959 when giving his first speech to the UN General Assembly, Cuba's Foreign Minister Raúl Roa urged other countries to help the nascent liberation movements in Angola & Mozambique. Two years later, following savage Portuguese reprisals against the 1961 uprisings, Cuban President Dorticós publicly denounced what he termed Portuguese "colonialist genocide" in Angola at the NAM's founding summit in Belgrade. Informal contacts with African leaders and national liberation movements continued throughout the 1960s, for example when the Director of the INRA (Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agrararia) Dr Nuñez Jiménez met with the MPLA's representative Kassinda at the first African peace conference in Accra (Graham Elliott Viney, Angola: a study in foreign intervention, 1974-1976, Faculty of Social Studies, University of Oxford (thesis), August 1978, p.182).

[52] Author's interview with Paulo Jorge. N'Dalu was replaced in January 2001 by Josefina Perpetua Pitra Diakidi (previously Angolan Ambassador to Sweden) after five years in the post.

[53] Nelson Valdés (in Cole Blasier & Carmelo Mesa-Lago (eds.), Cuba in the World, Pittsburgh (PA), University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979, p.91) notes that by September 1963 there were over 1,000 guerrillas from Angola, Mozambique and Namibia being trained by the Algerians and Cubans in Algeria.

contacts at a low level,[54] but following the meeting with Guevara in January 1965 a radically different military alliance would emerge, resulting in Cuba's first military mission to train the MPLA in Congo-Brazzaville.

## The birth of the MPLA-Cuban military alliance (January 1965)

On 5 January 1965 Che Guevara visited the MPLA delegation's headquarters in Brazzaville, meeting Agostinho Neto (President) and Lúcio Lara (Political Secretary).[55] The talks which followed were the first high-level contacts between the Cuban regime and the MPLA, and Guevara used the opportunity to outline his vision for a Pan-African revolution, listening with interest to Neto's requests for Cuban military aid and instructors to train the MPLA. Since launching the armed struggle in Luanda on 4 February 1961, the MPLA had suffered severe military setbacks and was struggling to compete with its main rival – the FNLA – based across the river in Léopoldville.[56] Roberto's close contacts with the regime there had led to the MPLA's expulsion from Léopoldville in November 1963, and the subsequent move to Brazzaville had caused considerable disruption to its operations, leaving the 1st Military Region in the Dembos mountains in a precarious position. With FNLA patrols intercepting and destroying all reinforcement columns – and with the Portuguese cordon cutting off the guerrillas from supplies and outside communication – the situation was becoming desperate,[57] and Neto's hopes of breaking the deadlock by extending the war into Cabinda had also met with failure, the 2nd Military Region

[54] During the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of the major events affecting the Cubans and MPLA occurred simultaneously in different parts of the world, impeding cooperation between the two. For example, the founding of the MPLA (on 10 December 1956) occurred only five days after Castro's army was all but wiped out at the Alegría de Pío ambush; the MPLA launched its uprising in Angola shortly before the Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961); Neto fought for the leadership of the MPLA against Viriato da Cruz shortly after the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' (October 1962); and the MPLA was expelled from Léopoldville just as Cuba was launching its military intervention in Algeria (October 1963). Nevertheless, the Cuban Revolution clearly influenced the ideological development of the MPLA, as can be seen by the MPLA's flag (whose colours – red and black with gold motifs – are identical to M-26-7's flag) and battle cry 'Vitória ou morte!' ('Victory or death!') which is similar to the Cuban Revolution's 'Patria o muerte, ¡venceremos!' ('Motherland or death, we will overcome!').

[55] Also present at the meeting were Jorge Serguera (designated Cuban Ambassador to Brazzaville) and Pascual Luvualu (a senior member of the Brazzaville government).

[56] See Introduction for background to Angolan insurgency (1961-65).

[57] Between 9 October 1961 (when the 'Ferreira Incident' signalled the start of open warfare between the UPA & MPLA) and January 1965, at least eight MPLA columns/patrols were intercepted and

quickly getting bogged down in the tricky terrain of the Mayombe jungle. Although in November 1964 intense diplomatic activity had managed to reverse the OAU's de-recognition of the MPLA, it would be some time before the MPLA's 3rd Military Region (the 'Eastern Front) could be launched in Moxico,[58] and in the meantime Neto was desperate for help in resurrecting the two existing guerrilla fronts before they were overwhelmed.

Neto's requests to Guevara were therefore two-fold: first, to send instructors, weaponry and equipment to arm and train an MPLA reinforcement column to be sent to the 1st Military Region;[59] and second, to send experienced Cuban guerrilla cadres to revitalise the 2nd Military Region in Cabinda and – if necessary – to fight alongside the MPLA guerrillas there. Guevara was only too happy to comply with Neto's request as it dovetailed neatly with the subsidiary role Brazzaville was to play as a support base for the Congo 'guerrilla madre', and following the meeting he sent instructions to Cuba to start preparing a large Cuban military mission for Brazzaville which would have multiple objectives. Promising that the Cuban military force would arrive before the end of the summer, Guevara shortly left for Guinea-Conakry for the next leg of his African tour, little realising that the military alliance he had concluded with the MPLA leadership would outlast him by decades, and would eventually culminate in the massive Cuban military intervention in Angola in November 1975 (see Chapters 4-5).[60] Several writers have speculated that during his

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destroyed by UPA-FNLA forces in northern Angola (in November 1961, March 1963, April 1963, two in July 1963, July 1964 and September 1964).

[58] Daniel Chipenda had been dispatched to Lusaka in late 1964 to begin preparations for launching a third guerrilla front, over a month before Zambia was due to become independent (24 October). This move proved precipitous, however, as Chipenda and his companion Ciel da Conceição were arrested on 14 September as they tried to enter Zambia, and then accused of subversion after the police found weapons and Communist literature (which were to be used to set up the MPLA office in Lusaka). Both men were tried, convicted and sentenced to four months' hard labour, and were not released until after Zambian independence, finally launching the 'Eastern Front' on 18 May 1966 (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1978, p.177).

[59] All accounts of this period state that the MPLA asked for two relief columns to be prepared by the Cubans (for example, Deutchmann, op. cit., p.3), but a close examination of events suggests that the decision to send a second column was either taken in the summer of 1966 during Neto's visit to Cuba, or in October 1966 once the 'Camilo Cienfuegos Column' had successfully reached the 1st Military Region (see Limbania Jiménez Rodríguez (Nancy), Heroínas de Angola, Havana: Ediciones Políticas, 1985, p.60). A third column – the 'Ferraz Bomboko' column – was trained in mid-1967 by the Cubans shortly before the final elements of their force withdrew (see next chapter).

[60] As Gabriel García Márquez later described it: "In that fleeting, anonymous passage through Africa, Che Guevara was to sow a [revolutionary] seed that nobody was able to eradicate" (from García

stay in Africa Guevara also met with Holden Roberto and Jonas Savimbi,[61] and although this has been vehemently denied by the Cuban government ever since, both men claim to have had some contact with Guevara at this time. Roberto alleges that Guevara wrote to him from Brazzaville inviting him to come across the Congo river from Léopoldville for a meeting, but Roberto refused saying that the FNLA was fighting a national liberation war and didn't want foreign involvement in it, a decision Guevara told him he would regret.[62]

**Alleged contact between Guevara and Savimbi**

While such contact with the FNLA does not seem implausible, Savimbi's claim to have been "one of the closest friends of Che Guevara" is completely without foundation.[63] Jonas Savimbi was originally from Munhango (Bié) on the Benguela railway line (along which his father had preached for most of his youth),[64] and had quickly emerged as the FNLA's most prominent Ovimbundu member, becoming Roberto's Foreign Minister after the formation of the government-in-exile (GRAE) in April 1962. A slippery and ideologically-malleable figure at the best of times, Savimbi resigned his post in July 1964 and briefly flirted with joining the MPLA, visiting their Brazzaville office in December of that year,[65] but he was allegedly

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Márquez's account of the 1975 Cuban intervention – 'Operation Carlota' – which is reproduced in full in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.41-60). Jorge Risquet later embellished the idea further: "The vast tree of friendship, nourished with blood, that has grown between the peoples of Cuba and Angola was planted by Che" (Deutchmann, op. cit., p.2).

[61] For example George Volsky (chapter entitled 'Cuba', in Communist Powers and Sub-Saharan Africa, Thomas. H Henriksen (ed.), Hoover Institution Press, Stanford (CA), 1981, p.61 & John Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.161.

[62] Interview with author in Luanda, 27 May 1998: "[Che Guevara] sent me a letter, but I didn't meet him. Because he was in Brazzaville, and he went to see an MPLA camp in Cabinda and was very unimpressed. And he wrote me a letter in Kinshasa saying he wanted to meet me and that I should come over to see him and that he wanted to help the FNLA... And I refused him, saying this was a national liberation war and we didn't want any foreigners involved. And he said to me that I would regret that decision." Roberto alleges the exchange of letters took place in March 1965.

[63] Quoted in Fred Bridgland, Jonas Savimbi, A Key to Africa, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1986, p.192.

[64] In the central square of Jamba – UNITA's main base in Cuando Cubango during the 1980s – there is a monument resembling a train inscribed with the number '5017p', which according to UNITA was the number assigned to Savimbi's father while carrying out forced labour on the Benguela railway line.

[65] For Savimbi's visit see Marcum, op. cit., p.161 & Van der Waals, op. cit., p.108. The MPLA allegedly offered Savimbi the post of Secretary of Foreign Affairs, but after what he saw of the MPLA's guerrilla operations in Cabinda he declined. The MPLA for their part insist that they were equally unimpressed with Savimbi, and the desire of both parties to have no further dealings with each other was clearly mutual.

unimpressed by what he saw and returned to Switzerland to complete his *licence*. By this stage he was in contact with the Chinese who had offered to help him set up his own guerrilla movement, and on completion of his doctorate in July 1965 he immediately flew to China for intensive guerrilla training, only returning to Africa in November. Thus throughout Guevara's tour of Africa and his subsequent guerrilla campaign in the eastern Congo, Savimbi was either in Switzerland or China, making any meeting between the two men extremely unlikely, if not impossible.[66] After spending several months in Zambia, in October 1966 Savimbi eventually crossed into Moxico to found UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), but his Ovimbundu-dominated guerrilla movement would fail to take hold as its rivals had, and would eventually end up collaborating with the Portuguese. It would not be until the early 1980s – long after Angolan independence and the disappearance of the FNLA – that UNITA would start to rise to prominence in Angola (see Chapter 8).

**Guevara seeks support for his Congo 'guerrilla madre' across Africa**

Following his ten-day visit to Congo-Brazzaville, Guevara continued on his erratic tour of Africa, casting the net as wide as possible in his search for African support for his proposed 'guerrilla madre' in the eastern Congo. Guevara's 'Continental Revolution' got only a lukewarm reception, however, and perhaps as a result of this he accepted an opportunistic invitation to visit China in early February, revealing his

[66] Claims by Savimbi that he spoke at length with Guevara in Dar-es-Salaam following a meeting of African liberation leaders are belied by the false chronology Savimbi constructs. He places the meeting in January 1964 (Bridgland, op. cit., p.60), over a year before Guevara actually held such a meeting in Dar-es-Salaam (see below), perhaps in an attempt to suggest that their enlightening discussion was what finally convinced him to resign from the FNLA (which he did the following July). Savimbi did visit Brazzaville in December 1964 at the invitation of the MPLA, but he left for a tour of the Eastern Bloc before Guevara's arrival. He was completing his *licence* in Switzerland when the meeting of African liberation leaders in Dar-Es-Salaam did take place, he was training in China throughout Guevara's operation in the Congo, and he was in Zambia during Guevara's last months in Africa, when he was hidden in the Cuban Embassy in Dar-es-Salaam. The suggestion by Bridgland (op. cit., p.61) that Savimbi travelled to Algiers with Guevara in early 1964 is undercut by the fact that they were allegedly attending the Second Economic Seminar of the Organisation of Afro-Asian Solidarity: this was held in February 1965 when Savimbi was by his own admission in Eastern Europe. The Cubans for their part are quite insistent that the two men never met, for example Jorge Risquet: "Che Guevara never saw Savimbi, nor did Savimbi ever see him. Ever. Firstly, Savimbi wasn't in Brazzaville. Well, first actually was the fact that in 1965 Savimbi was unknown. In 1965 there was the MPLA led by

true sympathies in the increasingly-bitter Sino-Soviet split.[67] Determined to press ahead with his plans, on 11 February Guevara flew back to Dar-es-Salaam – at the time the unofficial centre of revolutionary activity in Africa – and through the Cuban Ambassador Pablo Rivalta he made contact with the CNL leadership. Formed in October 1963 from a rainbow coalition of rebel groups in Congo-Kinshasa's eastern provinces, the CNL had launched its rebellion in April 1964, capturing Stanleyville (Kisangani) the following September and setting up a 'liberated area' in eastern Congo.[68] The CNL's large operating area along the western banks of Lake Tanganyika (on the Zambian border) seemed ideal for Guevara's plans, but the CNL's initial success masked a brewing power struggle between the nominal president Christophe Gbenye and his subordinates Gaston Soumaliot and Laurent Kabila. Guevara's first meetings with the latter two were not promising; he found Soumaliot vague and inscrutable,[69] and though more impressed by Kabila, Guevara noted his open contempt for his colleagues which did not bode well for the future. Guevara did manage to convince Kabila that the Congo was an African problem which should concern *all* African revolutionaries, but he held back from telling Kabila about his plans for the eastern Congo – intending to sound out each of the African liberation

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Neto as the only real patriotic liberation movement, and the FNLA" (from Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.336).

[67] The split between the Soviet Union and Communist China had become public in October 1961 when Chou En-Lai walked out of Communist Party Congress in Moscow, and was made official in February 1965 by China's boycott of the meeting of world Communist parties in Moscow. Hence Guevara's visit to China the very same month could only be interpreted by the Soviets as a vote of confidence in the Chinese government. As the Chinese were by then already backing the CNL, it is likely that they encouraged Guevara to meet the leadership immediately, hence his departure directly for Dar-es-Salaam. Guevara described the trip thus: "The trip to China was a lightning one to discuss a series of opinions about the Chinese [Communist] Party; discussions with Liu Shaoqi [China's Head of State]; with practically the whole Party Secretariat. I was there for about four or five days. We set out our mutual points of view. Nothing really of note came up. From an economic point of view we made a long-term agreement to exchange opinions to see if we could, eventually, develop some specific aspects of our mutual aid" (author's translation from Gálvez, op. cit., p.43).

[68] The Cubans had been following the CNL's progress, and as early as 28 June 1964 the Cuban military review, *Verde Olivo* (Havana), had published an article about the insurgent movements in Africa, declaring: "The struggle has just begun, these are its first flames. It will, no doubt, be a long struggle, in Angola and Portuguese Guinea as well, but what matters is that a powerful guerrilla movement has taken hold in the Congo" (quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76').

[69] Guevara described Soumaliot thus: "He is a different man [from Kabila]; much less developed politically, much older, his primary instinct is to say nothing or speak very little and then in vague phrases, with which he appears to express great subtlety of thought but, how ever hard he tries, he doesn't give the impression of being a true leader of the people" (author's translation of Guevara's diary, quoted in Gálvez, op. cit., p.47). Guevara's view of Kabila was more positive, however, Guevara noting that Kabila had a "clear, concrete and firm" idea of the struggle (Anderson, op. cit., p.622).

movements first – and instead offered 30 Cuban military instructors which Kabila gratefully accepted.

**Guevara's meeting with the African revolutionary leaders, 16 February 1965**

With the CNL apparently on board, Guevara then arranged to meet the leaders of the main African liberation movements in Dar-es-Salaam, intending to see each of them in separate, relaxed and informal meetings, during which he could explain his strategy and win over each movement to his cause according to their specific needs and beliefs. Due to a misunderstanding by the Cuban Embassy staff, however, all the movements were called together at the same time, resulting in a meeting which Guevara later described as "tumultuous, in which fifty or more people participated, representatives of the movements of ten or more countries, each one divided into two or more tendencies."[70] In this confrontational and confused atmosphere, Guevara's attempts to articulate his strategy for a Pan-African revolution fell on deaf ears. Some were particularly stung by his suggestion that guerrillas could only be trained in combat on the guerrilla front, which seemed to imply that over half of those gathered there (who had seen little if no combat) were not qualified to lead their guerrilla movements. In the end, those present didn't share his analysis that the war in the Congo was part of a greater war against American neo-imperialism, and their reaction was in Guevara's words: "more than cold; although the majority abstained from making any type of comment, there were some who asked to speak to reproach me violently for the advice I had given."[71] Guevara vainly insisted that a victory against imperialism in the Congo would have continental repercussions and that "it wasn't a war within frontiers but a war against a common oppressor, as omnipresent in Mozambique as in Malawi, Rhodesia or South Africa, the Congo or Angola". But his

[70] Author's translation from Gálvez, op. cit., p.50.

[71] The guerrilla movements – the majority of which were all ready weak militarily – resented the idea that they should send their own countrymen to fight and die in another country's war when they were short of men for their own guerrilla insurgencies. Many feared that they would lose the support of their men if they followed such a strategy.

proposal was flatly rejected, and Guevara was left with the feeling that "Africa had a long road to travel before reaching true revolutionary maturity".[72]

## Guevara breaks with Cuban government, 24 February 1965

The outright rejection of his Congo proposal was a humiliating setback for Guevara's dreams of revolution in Africa, and left him perilously short of options. Unwelcome in Cuba, he had placed all his bets on the success of the Congo 'guerrilla madre', and having received a categorical rejection of his strategy he was now quite literally a revolutionary without a revolution to fight. Meekly promising Kabila that he would still get his 30 Cuban military instructors, Guevara quickly left Dar-es-Salaam and for the next month wandered around Africa and Eastern Europe, meeting trusted allies (among them Nasser and Ben Bella who poured further scorn on his Congo strategy) and weighing up his options.[73] Eventually – after much thought – it appears that he felt it was time to resolve once and for all the doubts hanging over his future, and so on 24 February 1965 he gave what was to be his last public speech in Algiers, publicly breaking with the Cuban government.[74] Described by his supporters as his 'último cartucho' ('last cartridge', i.e. last word), Guevara's speech called on the global community to support the Third World (a term he is credited with coining) in its struggle against imperialism, and openly criticised the developed countries of the Eastern Bloc (in particular the Soviet Union) for their trade policy which was in his view just as imperialist as that of the West.[75] Coming only the day before the World Summit of Communist Parties in Moscow, the speech was a clear break with Cuban government policy, and it must have caused Raúl Castro (who was attending the

[72] All quotes translated by author from Gálvez, op. cit., pp.50-51. Guevara nevertheless took something positive from the experience, concluding that "we were left forever with the joy of having met people prepared to continue the struggle to its ultimate ends".

[73] Guevara paid a second visit to Egypt during this period, spending a few days with Nasser on political campaign in the interior. Nasser was equally sceptical about Guevara's plans for the Congo and reportedly warned him that if he thought he could be like Tarzan, leading and protecting the black man, then he was very mistaken. In Nasser's view, the whole operation could only end badly (Anderson, op. cit., p.620).

[74] The speech was made at the Second Economic Seminar of the Organisation of Afro-Asian Solidarity.

[75] Guevara declared that "the Socialist countries have a moral duty to liquidate their tacit complicity with the exploiting nations of the West", implicitly comparing their trade policy to the USA's neo-imperialism (quoted in Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.27).

summit) some embarrassment when he found himself having to defend Guevara's views the next day in the face of indignant Soviet outrage.

**Guevara is persuaded to command the Congo mission, March 1965**

By the time Guevara arrived back in Havana on 14 March 1965, his position in Cuba had become untenable, and he was immediately driven to Castro's office in the headquarters of the PCC (Cuban Communist Party) for a heated discussion with Castro who was furious at his Algiers speech. For not only did Guevara's continuing calls for revolution in Latin America threaten to undermine the uneasy compromise Cuba had reached with the Soviets over the issue of Communists parties in Latin America (which opposed armed struggle),[76] but his open sympathy for the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet split now clashed head-on with Castro who only the day before had publicly denounced China's split with the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). As Anderson puts it, Castro's aims were to "consolidate Cuba's economic well-being and his own political survival, and for that he was willing to compromise. Che's mission was to spread the socialist revolution. The time for him to leave Cuba was drawing near."[77] But with all revolutionary avenues in Latin America cut off for the near future – and with no African support for his Congo strategy – it was unclear where exactly Guevara could go.[78] No longer welcome in Cuba where he was now a liability to the government, Guevara had effectively forced himself into a corner, and in the fortnight following his return he was persuaded (or forced) to go ahead with his Congo operation anyway – despite its categorical rejection by the CNL, the African liberation movements and his closest African allies. That Guevara should have considered launching the Congo operation under such unfavourable conditions is a

[76] In particular Guevara's speech at the UN in December 1964 – calling for international revolution under Cuba's mantle – had potentially upset the compromise reached that month with the Soviet Union under which Cuba agreed to deal only with the established (Moscow-controlled) Communist parties in Latin America. In return, Moscow officially recognised that armed struggle was a valid means of achieving socialism, and that its use should be assessed by each Communist party (Philip Brenner & James G. Blight, The Crisis and Cuban-Soviet Relations: Fidel Castro's Secret 1968 Speech, CWIHP, Serial No. 6, 1996).

[77] Op. cit., p.587.

[78] While in Dar-es-Salaam Guevara had been visited by Juan Carretero (Chief of MININT's Latin American section) who informed him that all efforts to resurrect the Masetti column had failed (Gálvez, op. cit., pp.48-49). The only other Latin American option thus became the embryonic guerrilla operation in Bolivia which would not be ready until late 1966 at the earliest.

clear indication of his desperation at the time, and he could only hope that his force of character and the eventual success of the enterprise would – in the end – win the many doubters over to his cause.

## The dual Cuban missions to eastern Congo & Congo-Brazzaville

Guevara's role as overall commander of the Congo operation – indeed his very presence in Africa – had not been authorised by the CNL leadership, however, and in an effort to conceal this fact Víctor Dreke was appointed the official commander of the operation, with José María Martínez 'Papi' Tamayo as second-in-command.[79] Thus Guevara's *nom de guerre* would be 'Tatu' ('Three' in Swahili) while Dreke and Tamayo were 'Moja' and 'Mbili' ('One' and 'Two') respectively. The Cuban force under their command – 'Columna 1' – would total 113 Cubans (considerably larger than the thirty men originally promised to Kabila) and would be divided into three platoons of infantry and one of artillery.[80] These men would first make their way to Dar-es-Salaam in small groups, after which they would be transported and ferried to the CNL's 'liberated area' on the western banks of Lake Tanganyika. A second force – 'Columna 2' or the 'Patrice Lumumba Battalion' – would simultaneously be sent to Brazzaville to carry out multiple missions, its primary objective to act as a strategic reserve for Guevara's operation in the Congo.[81] This 250-man contingent would be under the joint command of Rolando Kindelán Bles (the Military Chief) and Jorge Risquet Valdés (the Political Chief),[82] and while in Brazzaville it would also provide

[79] Víctor Dreke was a veteran of the Revolutionary War and in 1965 was Vice-Chief of the LCB in the Central Army (Camagüey, Las Villas and Matanzas). Following the Congo mission, he would later go on to command the Cuban internationalist operation in Guiné from 1967-68 (Gálvez, op. cit., p.44 & Gleijeses, 'Havana's Ambassadors', pp.52-54). 'Papi' Tamayo had served with Raúl Castro during the Revolutionary War, and then fought alongside Turcios Lima in Guatemala, eventually becoming an important part of Barba Roja's intelligence apparatus, training Vasco Bengochea's Trotskyite group and Héctor Béjar's Peruvian guerrillas (Anderson, op. cit., p.575). He would later accompany Guevara on the fated mission to Bolivia where he was killed on 30 July 1967.

[80] The Cuban force contained 11 officers, 19 sergeants, 11 corporals and 72 soldiers (Gálvez, op. cit., p.61). By the time Guevara's force withdrew in November 1965, 123 Cubans had served in the Congo campaign. Six of them never returned.

[81] Guevara ultimately intended this considerable military force to join his guerrillas in the Congo once their 'liberated area' had been established, although Risquet has suggested that in the event the Brazzaville contingent would probably have reinforced Pierre Mulele's CNL guerrilla group as it was much closer to Brazzaville than Guevara's column (Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.333).

[82] Kindelán was a veteran of the Revolutionary War who had fought alongside Camilo Cienfuegos, and in 1965 he was undergoing a course at La Cabaña when called to command the Brazzaville mission

the assistance Guevara had promised to Massemba-Débat and the MPLA in early January. First, they would send half a dozen of their most experienced cadres to the MPLA's Cabinda front to fight alongside the guerrillas there; second, they would arm and train the Congolese militia to withstand a possible invasion from Congo-Kinshasa; and third, they would train and equip a reinforcement column for the MPLA to relieve its 1st Military Region. The mission was expected to last for one year, although both the Cubans and Congolese expected to extend it if necessary.

## Selection procedure & training for the Cuban missions

The Cubans who went to the Congo were selected from the ranks of the FAR in January 1965, and all were strictly volunteers.[83] As would later be the case during the larger intervention in Angola in the 1970s and 1980s, men were chosen as much for their ideological soundness as for their technical abilities, although there was an unusually high proportion of black Cubans among the group – perhaps 95% of them.[84] The reason for this disparity appears to have been that they were thought less conspicuous when travelling to Africa and when on operations there, although the belief that Afro-Cubans were less susceptible to endemic African diseases – in particular malaria – may also have been a factor.[85] The volunteers were told only that they would be performing an internationalist mission abroad and that it could last for up to two years, and by all accounts the mission was heavily oversubscribed.[86] By

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(Brig.-Gen. Rolando Kindelán Bles in Luis Báez, op. cit., p.61). Risquet was at the time a senior figure in the PCC, and it has been suggested that his posting to Brazzaville was a punishment for having clashed with his Party superiors in eastern Cuba. Risquet would later emerge as Castro's preferred go-between with the MPLA government, delivering messages to the Angolan president and eventually heading the Cuban delegation which joined the American-brokered peace negotiations in January 1988 (see Chapter 10).

[83] Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.96) has noted that by making all the Cuban internationalists officially volunteers, no Cuban institution was officially linked to missions in the Congo, even though Cuba did provide much of the weaponry and logistical support.

[84] Brig.-Gen. Rafael Moracén Limonta, who later commanded the detachment of Cuban instructors sent to the MPLA's Cabinda front, remembers: "We were all blacks. I had never seen so many all together." (author's translation from interview in Luis Báez, op. cit., p.261). Víctor Dreke (in Báez, op. cit., p.44) recalls that he was ordered to select 50 men from his LCB unit, the only conditions being that they be black and volunteers.

[85] Another more simple factor was that during their discussions in Dar-es-Salaam Gaston Soumaliot had asked Guevara that the instructors be black (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.).

[86] As Anderson (op. cit., p.692) describes it: "For most of them, it was a dream come true – to be an internationalist revolutionary had become one of the highest aspirations for Cubans serving in the

late January around 500 Cuban troops – the vast majority of them black – had been selected from several different FAR regiments across Cuba, and after being processed at 'La Tropical' stadium in Marianao (Havana), they were driven in early February to the 'Piti 1' military camp in Pinar del Río (western Cuba) for two month's intensive training. During this period they were visited on several occasions by Fidel Castro who met the men and explained the objectives of their mission,[87] and this may have contributed to their rather idealistic vision of the MPLA's liberation war which would receive a violent jolt when they experienced Angola's internecine conflict at first-hand. By late March the Cuban force was ready to start its mission, and it was then divided up into three groups – one for Guevara's mission in the eastern Congo, and two for Congo-Brazzaville – in preparation for its departure in early April.

**Guevara burns his bridges before leaving Cuba, March 1965**

Before leaving Cuba, however – in a gesture which seemed to sum up his defeat in the prolonged power struggle with Castro – Guevara handed Castro a mournful letter of resignation, admonishing him to release it to the public only when he deemed fit. Declaring that it was his intention to carry on the fight against imperialism outside Cuba's shores, Guevara formally renounced "my posts in the leadership of the Party, my post as Minister, my rank as Major, my status as a Cuban citizen", leaving no other interpretation but that he was leaving Cuba for good and would not be returning. Praising Castro's abilities as a leader and personal mentor, Guevara unequivocally declared that "[n]othing legal binds me to Cuba, only ties of another kind that cannot be broken", and concluded with the phrase which was to become his epitaph: "¡Hasta la Victoria, siempre!" ('Onwards to victory, always!').[88] It was in effect a farewell to arms, but if Guevara thought Castro would keep the letter secret – enabling Guevara to tear it up if he was forced to return at a later date – then he was to be disappointed, for Castro would read it out to the PCC Congress in October 1965, just as the Congo

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armed forces". One Cuban veteran who served in Congo-Brazzaville described his motivations for volunteering thus: "We dreamt of revolution... We wanted to be part of it, to feel that we were fighting for it. We were young, and the children of a revolution... In all those years we believed that at any moment [the United States was] going to strike us; and for us it was better to wage the war abroad than in our own country" (from Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.).

[87] Gálvez, op. cit., pp.44 & 60, Luis Báez, op. cit., p.262

operation was starting to collapse. More ominously, however, in March (before Guevara had even left Cuba) Castro secretly informed the Soviet Ambassador Alex Alexiev about Guevara's Congo operation,[89] effectively sabotaging (perhaps intentionally) what little chance Guevara had of success in the Congo. Possibly Castro was seeking Soviet support for future guerrilla operations in Africa, but – whatever his motivations might have been – the effect of his comments to Alexiev was to alert the Soviets to Guevara's presence in the Congo, enabling them to monitor the progress of their political nemesis until in November they decided to pull the plug on the whole operation (see next chapter).

On 1 April 1965 Guevara left Cuba disguised as a Latin American book-seller, and on 19 April he arrived in Dar-es-Salaam with the vanguard of his group. Five days later he and thirteen Cubans were ferried across Lake Tanganyika to Kibamba where they started setting up their new guerrilla headquarters, and over the next six months a further hundred Cuban internationalists would trickle into Kibamba from Dar-es-Salaam, the last group arriving in October. Three days after Guevara's arrival in the Congo, Cuba's secondary mission to Congo-Brazzaville also got underway when the largest ship in the Cuban merchant navy – El Uvero – left Matanzas (Cuba) as part of 'Operación Triángulo' (Operation Triangle), a complex mission to deliver military supplies to three different Cuban forces in Africa. Stopping first in Conakry to unload 315 crates for the PAIGC,[90] the ship then sailed via Accra to Brazzaville where it dropped off supplies for the Cuban mission and the first nine military instructors, before continuing to its final destination – Dar-es-Salaam – to drop supplies for the men from Guevara's column who were starting to arrive in Tanzania. After four days spent formalising their presence in Brazzaville, six of the Cuban instructors under Rafael Moracén Limonta then moved to the MPLA's training camp in Dolisie (Loubomo), leaving three men behind to prepare for the arrival of the main bulk of the column, arranging accommodation, transport and supplies. Throughout July and

[88] Quotes taken from translation of Che Guevara's Farewell Letter, reproduced in Appendix 1.
[89] Anderson, op. cit., p.639. Although Castro admonished Alexiev not to communicate this information to the Kremlin, he could have been in little doubt that Alexiev would do so (that was precisely his job, after all). Given Guevara's open antipathy with the Soviets, their only possible reaction would be to do all in their power to ensure the Congo operation was a failure.

August fifty more Cubans trickled into Brazzaville by air, and on 6 August the remainder of the Cuban battalion under Jorge Risquet set sail from Mariel (Cuba).[91] By the time they reached Pointe-Noire on 21 August, however, Guevara's guerrilla operation in the eastern Congo would have gone awry, and very quickly their mission would evolve from a back-up force for the Congo mission into the centre of Cuban military operations in Africa.

[90] Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.48. See next chapter for Cuba's military alliance with the PAIGC.

[91] My account of the arrival of 'Columna 2' in Congo-Brazzaville is taken from Jaime & Barber's interview with Jorge Risquet (op. cit., pp.333-334) & interviews with Brig.-Gen. Kindelán Bles & Brig.-Gen. Moracén Limonta in Báez (op. cit., pp.61-62 & 261-264).

# Chapter 2

## The Cuban mission in Brazzaville (1965-67) & the subsequent weakening in the Cuban-MPLA alliance (1967-74)

The two-year Cuban training mission in Brazzaville marked the start of the MPLA's twenty-six year military alliance with Cuba, and forged a bond between the Cubans and Angolans which was to withstand the turbulent and often traumatic years which followed for both the Revolutionary government and the MPLA. Set up as a rear-base for Guevara's ailing guerrilla insurgency in the eastern Congo, the Cuban military mission in Brazzaville would gradually take centre-stage, and would by 1966 have become the centre for Cuban military activity in Africa, replacing Algiers which was scaled down following the overthrow of Ben Bella's regime in June 1965. In direct contrast to the experience of Guevara's guerrillas in the eastern Congo – whose exasperation with their African allies and mistrust of the CNL leadership intensified throughout their mission – the Cubans in Congo-Brazzaville were to build strong personal relationships with their MPLA comrades which later served as a foundation for future military operations in Angola, most notably during the intervention in Angola in 1975 (see Chapter 4).[1] Over two years the Cubans would have some success training the Congolese militia and preparing three separate reinforcement columns for the MPLA's 1st Military Region, but they were to have bad luck infiltrating these guerrillas into Angola, and would eventually be forced to withdraw from Cabinda having had only a negligible effect on the insurgency there. In the end the mission would fizzle out in late 1967 – the Cubans switching their operations to Conakry while the MPLA moved its centre of operations to Lusaka – but the political alliance forged between Castro and Neto would nevertheless survive, and would later prove vital to Neto's survival as leader of the MPLA, and ultimately to the survival of the liberation movement itself.

[1] Many of the Cubans who served in the 'Patrice Lumumba Battalion' were deeply affected by their experiences in Congo-Brazzaville and later insisted on returning to Angola when Operation Carlota was launched in 1975. Rafael Moracén Limonta, for example, pestered Rául Castro throughout late 1975 for a return posting to Angola, romantically declaring: "I am an Angolan." (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.)

## Cuban involvement in the MPLA's 2nd Military Region (Cabinda)

In late May 1965 – before the bulk of the Cuban contingent for Brazzaville had even been assembled in Matanzas (Cuba) – the first nine Cuban military instructors under comandante Rafael Moracén Limonta arrived in Brazzaville incognito.[2] Through the Congolese government they obtained false documentation for their residence in the country, and after four days six of them travelled to the MPLA's main guerrilla base camp in Dolisie (Loubomo), 30 miles north of the border with Cabinda.[3] In Dolisie the MPLA had its main CIR (Centro de Instrucção Revolucionária, or training camp), several large arms and supply warehouses, and the official command post for the 2nd Military Region under the command of Hoji Ya Henda.[4] Henda was a charismatic figure and a natural guerrilla leader – despite never having had any proper military training – and he quickly established a strong rapport with the Cubans. Also present in Dolisie was a captain from the Ghanaian army, Kojo Tchikata, who had been sent by President Nkrumah to assist the MPLA, and the six Cubans teamed up with him to form the nucleus of the MPLA's new training corps.[5] After acclimatising themselves for a few days the Cubans were split evenly between two platoons of MPLA guerrillas, and in early June 1965 they crossed into Cabinda, thus becoming the first Cuban military personnel to carry out military operations in Angolan territory. Within a few days they had their first clash with the Portuguese colonial army which was attempting to capture an MPLA camp in the border area, and over the next five months they criss-crossed the border, training the MPLA guerrillas and laying numerous ambushes of Portuguese forces.[6]

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[2] During the trip aboard El Uvero the Cubans claimed to be students taking part in a festival in Algiers. On arrival in Brazzaville Moracén assumed the cover story that he was an Angolan political refugee from Chibia (Huíla) called Humberto (Moracén in Báez, op. cit., p.262).

[3] The MPLA had two operational zones in Congo-Brazzaville: Zone A which was a supply dump at Pointe-Noire, and Zone B which was the main guerrilla HQ at Dolisie (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[4] At the camp there were usually around 90-95 Angolan guerrillas, either just returned from the front or based there to oversee the operations of the CIR (Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.334).

[5] Moracén in Báez, op. cit., pp.261-263. Jorge Risquet maintained in his interview with Deutchmann that "this Ghanaian was there along with four Cubans" (Deutchmann, op. cit., p.3), but in a later interview stated there were six Cubans, just as Moracén had (Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.334). Among the six Cubans were Rodolfo Puente Ferro, Juan B Portuondo & César Barthelemy (Nancy, op. cit., p.42).

[6] Moracén in Báez, op. cit., p.263. Risquet claims that they were in Cabinda for only two months, but he may have been referring only to their initial penetration of the enclave: "the group of six Cuban

The experience of fighting together in the Mayombe jungle was one of "mutual learning" (as Moracén later put it),[7] the MPLA guerrillas picking up the technical skills of guerrilla warfare while educating the Cubans on the realities of the inter-tribal conflict in Angola. The Angolans received basic technical training from the Cubans – on the operation and maintenance of their rifles and light artillery – as well as irregular tactical instruction, in particular on the laying of ambushes.[8] During the first Cuban-commanded ambush the guerrillas captured their first rifle from a Portuguese soldier, this single statistic speaking volumes about the 2nd Military Region's pitiful lack of success over the previous two years. But they were testing times for the Cuban instructors who were accustomed to the regimented discipline of the FAR and who "found themselves in a completely alien culture with a very different concept of discipline".[9] In particular the Cubans were disturbed by the acute tribalism infecting the guerrilla contingent, on occasion putting lives in danger when Umbundu guerrillas refused to help out their Bakongo comrades (and vice-versa). To the Cubans – all of whom were the product of the Cuban regime's explicitly non-racist policy – the depth of inter-tribal hatred was baffling, and Moracén later admitted that "[t]o me they were all Angolans. But they didn't have this concept".[10] It was a problem Guevara was to run into time and again on the Congo front, and the Cuban reaction to it – something between confusion and outrage – as much reflected the Cubans' highly-idealistic approach to internationalism, as it did their lack of understanding of African nationalism at the time.[11] Nevertheless, the experience of

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comrades led by Moracén stayed for two months in Cabinda fighting alongside Angolan comrades, teaching them how to use the weapons, ambush tactics, guerrilla tactics, and other light artillery weapons which they had, and participating in combat alongside them" (author's translation from Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.334).

[7] Quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

[8] Moracén in Báez, op. cit., p.263.

[9] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

[10] Author's translation of Moracén (in Báez, op. cit., p.263). Inter-tribal conflict would prove to be an endemic problem for the MPLA – as it was for the vast majority of African liberation movements – and it would still be a prevalent theme on the Cabinda front six years later when Pepetela wrote his acclaimed novel Mayombe. The novel, which centres on a group of MPLA guerrillas fighting in the Mayombe forest in the early 1970s, is principally concerned with the divisive effects of tribalism and how these have to be overcome if the new Angolan nation is to be created. So controversial were the themes explored in this work that only the personal intervention of Agostinho Neto led to its belated publication in 1980.

[11] As one Cuban internationalist who later served in Guiné put it: "All I knew about Africa [before I went there] was the Tarzan movies " (quoted in Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.65).

fighting together and sharing the same daily risks bred a deep sense of camaraderie between the Cubans and Angolans, and over the months a mutual respect developed between the trainers and their recruits.[12]

The Cabinda front was a particularly challenging environment in which to carry out guerrilla operations, and the effectiveness of the Cuban instructors was constantly hampered by the exceptionally-difficult terrain. The guerrillas' principal infiltration route into Cabinda cut directly through the Mayombe – the world's second largest (and densest) jungle – and although this afforded them almost unlimited cover, the thick vegetation made the going very tough. It was at least a day's march to the nearest Portuguese barracks at Sanga Planiche (only just over the border), and up to a week's trek to Belize (only 40 miles south of Dolisie), the first settlement of any importance in northern Cabinda. The sparsely-populated area offered little in the way of local support – especially as the few tribes which did live in the Mayombe were extremely suspicious of the Umbundu-dominated MPLA and tended to support FLEC – and thus the Cuban-MPLA campaign in Cabinda tended to involve little more than brief sorties into the enclave, inconclusive clashes with the first Portuguese patrols they encountered, and then rapid withdrawals to Dolisie for fresh supplies.[13] Although the training the MPLA guerrillas received was invaluable in teaching them the basics of guerrilla warfare, the Cuban instructors' inability to escalate the insurgency in Cabinda convinced the Cuban commanders in Brazzaville that the 2nd Military Region had very little potential to develop into a successful guerrilla front, and that they would be wiser to deploy their forces elsewhere. For this reason, after one year the majority of the MPLA's guerrillas were withdrawn from the Cabinda

[12] Moracén was deeply affected by his experience in Cabinda and developed a strong bond with the Angolans: "'I looked at them all,' he wrote after delivering a particularly severe scolding in which he had given vent to all his frustrations, 'and I was moved, I felt love for them. They had such dignity that I felt it was worth dying with them if I had to.'" (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.).

[13] When visiting the 2nd Military Region six months earlier, Savimbi had been unimpressed by these tactics, noting that: "The MPLA had only 30 men there, and between five and ten of them might go into Cabinda at a time. They might ambush a Portuguese car and then run back immediately to Dolisie (Loubomo): they never stayed to mobilise the people. Though the FNLA was disorganised and Roberto was politically inarticulate, it was clear to me that the FNLA was doing more than the MPLA" (quoted in Bridgland, op. cit., p.65).

front and brought to Brazzaville where they were incorporated into the reinforcement columns destined for the 1st Military Region (see below).[14]

**The failure of Guevara's operation in the eastern Congo (June-November 1965)**

As Rolando Kindelán and Jorge Risquet were making final preparations to ship the bulk of their back-up force to Brazzaville, Guevara's guerrilla operation in the eastern Congo started to run into trouble. Despite the successful infiltration of over 120 Cuban military instructors into the eastern Congo during the mission's first six months, relations with the Cubans CNL allies quickly became strained, and Guevara grew increasingly frustrated with his Tutsi and Congolese recruits who were undisciplined, racked by tribal divisions and (to Guevara's alarm) seemed to put more stock in black magic than military tactics.[15] Kabila consistently failed to live up to his promises to visit the front, and following the suspicious drowning of Mitoudidi – the only CNL officer in whom Guevara had any faith – communication between the Cubans and the CNL leadership broke down completely.[16] Conscious that Léopoldville was sending a mercenary force under the notorious Mike Hoare into the eastern Congo, Guevara was anxious to carry out some sort of attack to revitalise the crumbling guerrilla front, and on 20 June he ordered a raid on the 400-man Congolese garrison at Bendera, 12 miles south-west of his main camp at Kibamba on the shores of Lake Tanganyika (see map). By the time the Cuban-CNL force reached the outskirts of the military camp on 29 June, however, nearly half the guerrillas had deserted, and the attack was easily driven off by the Congolese, four Cubans being killed in the process.[17] Frustrated by this set-back, Guevara's fears of an imminent

[14] Moracén in Báez, op. cit., p.263.

[15] Guevara was particularly bemused by many of the African guerrillas' faith in 'dawa', a magic potion made of a mixture of herbs by the local muganga (witch doctor). Applied immediately before battle in the form of a black mark on the guerrilla's forehead (usually with coal), the potion was believed to protect him from the white man's bullets. Many of the guerrillas swore by it and refused to go into combat without it. When Guevara first was first told of its use by Lieut.-Col. Lambert, he thought he was joking (Gálvez, op. cit., pp.84-85).

[16] Guevara described Mitoudidi's death as 'the death of a hope': "Thus, in a stupid accident, the life of the man who had started to bring some organisation to that terrible chaos which was the Kibamba base was lost... the real truth is that the only person with authority disappeared just now in the Lake" (Gálvez, op. cit., p.112).

[17] Guevara later described the failed attack in his diary of the Congo campaign: "Of the 160 men [who started out from the Cuban base camp], 60 had deserted before the attack started and many more never even fired a shot. At the moment they were required to fire on the barracks, the Congolese nearly

split within the CNL were not allayed by a brief visit from Kabila one week later, and in August they were then confirmed when Soumaliot – the man in whose abilities Guevara had the least faith – ousted Christophe Gbenye as leader of the movement.

Gathering his Cuban internationalists together on 12 August, Guevara declared that there was no chance of winning the war with such an undisciplined rabble, and that his dream of training other African revolutionaries in the Congo was totally unfeasible.[18] Coming nearly a fortnight before the bulk of the Cuban military contingent arrived in Brazzaville, Guevara's admission effectively ended Brazzaville's role as a reinforcement column, and the mission there would very quickly begin to concentrate on its 'subsidiary' roles, namely the training of the Congolese militia and the MPLA reinforcement columns (see below). Determined to see his Congolese operation through to the bitter end, Guevara nevertheless stayed on in Kibamba with the Cuban contingent and attempted to reorganise the CNL's guerrilla front, but in September Hoare's mercenary force launched a surprise offensive which overran the guerrillas' forward positions, threatening to wipe out the Cuban contingent. The definitive blow to Guevara's operation did not come from the mercenaries, however, but from Léopoldville where on 13 October Moïse Tshombe was overthrown by his long-term rival Kasavubu, overnight changing the political climate.[19] Ten days later Kasavubu spoke at an OAU meeting in Ghana, promising negotiations with the CNL and announcing that the white mercenaries which had caused such controversy would be withdrawn immediately – and that as a quid pro quo all other foreign forces should do likewise.[20] Kasavubu's message was directed primarily at Tanzania which was providing Guevara with rear-bases and supplies, and

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always fired into the air, in fact the majority of the guerrillas closed their eyes and held down the triggers of their automatic weapons until the ammunition ran out. The enemy returned accurate fire with 60mm mortars causing several casualties and provoking instantaneous flight" (author's translation from Gávlez. op. cit., p.129).

[18] Anderson. op. cit., pp.655-656. Guevara's mistrust of Soumaliot was not properly communicated to the Cuban leadership in Havana, however, and this led to near farcical attempts by Guevara to reverse Castro's promises to Soumaliot (who visited Havana in late September) to send 50 Cuban doctors to eastern Congo.

[19] Tshombe had fled Katanga (Shaba) in January 1964 following the capture of the province by UN forces, but returned from exile in late 1964 to become prime minister. Following his removal by Kasavubu, Tshombe fled once more to Spain from where he was kidnapped in 1967 and taken to Algeria. He was to remain there under house arrest until his death (from a heart-attack) in June 1969.

[20] Mobutu and Hoare later managed to persuade Kasavubu to let the mercenaries stay until the end of their contracts, enabling them to complete their offensive against the CNL in eastern Congo.

under pressure from the Soviets (who were keen to curtail Guevara's unauthorised guerrilla operation) Tanzania was forced to comply,[21] President Nyerere summoning Pablo Rivalta a few days later to inform him that he would henceforth be stopping all aid to the Cubans in the Congo.[22]

On 1 November Rivalta cabled Guevara the devastating news. "It was the coup de grace for a moribund Revolution" wrote Guevara later.[23] On 4 November – with mercenary forces closing in on his main base camp, and Cuba's African allies demanding the withdrawal of his force from eastern Congo – Guevara received a final cable directly from Castro. Accepting the hopelessness of the situation, it nevertheless left the decision on whether to withdraw or not to Guevara, ordering him above all to avoid the total annihilation of his Cuban force. Briefly nurturing wild dreams of trekking across most of the Congo to link up with Mulele's CNL force in the north, Guevara eventually admitted defeat and on 18 November ordered the evacuation of his forces – even as his upper base camp was under attack.[24] On 20 November Guevara and all but six of his Cubans were withdrawn by boat from Kibamba, those remaining having volunteered to search for three Cubans who had gone missing in the retreat.[25] "It was a desolate, sobering and inglorious spectacle,"

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[21] Anderson (op. cit., p.666) suggests that the Soviets had originally become involved with the CNL in an attempt to compete with the Chinese who were already providing considerable military assistance to various guerrilla movements in Africa, but then decided to back a negotiated settlement when the situation in Zaire changed.

[22] Nyerere also complained bitterly about the behaviour of the CNL leadership living in Dar-es-Salaam and Kigoma (on the western banks of lake Tanganyika) who were "constantly going on drunken sprees, womanising, going from party to party, and making constant trips to Cairo" (author's translation from Gálvez, op. cit., p.272).

[23] Gálvez, op. cit., pp.272-273. The cable read as follows: "Comrade Tatu: this morning Pablo [Rivalta] was called by the [Tanzanian] Government to be told that, in the light of the agreements reached at the OAU meeting regarding non-intervention in other states' affairs, both they and the other Governments which have until now been giving aid to the CNL, will have to change the character of that aid. [They also told him] that, as a consequence, they have asked us to withdraw the forces we have there as a contribution towards this policy. They recognise that we have given more than many African States and that for now we should say nothing to the CNL until we have withdrawn, and then the President [Nyerere] himself will summon those leaders and inform them of the decision taken by the African States. A message has been sent to Havana. We await your opinion" (author's translation).

[24] Ironically, as news of the fall of the base camp arrived in Kibamba Guevara was in conference with the Congolese officers who had voted to end the campaign, so there really was little choice left for him but to withdraw (Anderson, op. cit., p.667).

[25] The six Cubans who stayed behind in Kigoma were Siki, Ishirine, Ahalla, Anchali, Alau & Wasiri. It was not until June 1966 that they found two of the missing Cubans – Ñyenñyea & Chepua – who were seriously ill in a kimbo (hut). The last missing Cuban – Aurino – was never found and was

Guevara wrote later.[26] Five days later Mobutu overthrew Kasavubu in a coup, and for the next 32 years the fate of Congo-Kinshasa would be sealed under his corrupt and autocratic leadership. Mobutu's seizure of power massively boosted the FNLA's profile in Kinshasa, and it rapidly rose to become the spoiled child of the Zairian Army, Mobutu providing military bases and weaponry to bolster Roberto's flagging ENLA (Exército Nacional de Libertação de Angola, National Liberation Army of Angola). But Mobutu would prove a fickle and wily patron for Roberto, constantly shifting his allegiance on territorial issues (in particular Cabinda), and following the FNLA's disastrous performance in the 'Second Liberation War' he would see fit to withdraw his support, effectively killing off Roberto's bid for power (see Chapter 8).

## Guevara ponders his next move in Dar-es-Salaam, Dec. 1965-February 1966

Following the departure of the Cuban guerrilla contingent from Dar-es-Salaam on 29 November,[27] Che Guevara ensconced himself secretly in the Cuban Embassy and over the next ten weeks wrote up his campaign diary, entitled 'Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria: El Congo' (Episodes from the Revolutionary War: The Congo).[28] The opening words of the diary – 'This is the story of a failure' – sum up Guevara's defeatist and self-critical mood at the time, and what followed was a bitter analysis of

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presumed dead. The five other Cubans who died in the campaign were Ansurune, Inne, Telathini, Kawama, & Bahasa (Gálvez, op, cit., pp.349-350).

[26] Following Guevara's withdrawal, the remnants of CNL forces in the Lake Tanganyika region were swiftly crushed by Hoare's mercenary force, and within a few years all of the CNL's leaders (bar Laurent Kabila) were either dead, under arrest or had fled the country. Ironically, Kabila would eventually overthrow Mobutu – 32 years later – and become president of the newly-renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo, ruling the country for four chaotic years until his assassination in January 2001. The Cuban government has never acknowledged that Guevara was actually beaten by white mercenary forces, however, and their subsequent harsh treatment of mercenaries captured during the 'Second Liberation War' may have resulted from their desire for retribution (see Chapter 5).

[27] There is some disagreement over whether the entire Cuban force returned directly to Cuba, or whether some of them went instead to Brazzaville to reinforce the mission there. García Márquez asserts that some of Guevara's men "went on to Brazzaville, to train guerrilla units for the PAIGC (then led by Amílcar Cabral) and especially for the MPLA" (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.46), whereas Gálvez's more detailed account maintains that they all returned directly to Cuba (Gálvez, op. cit., p.324).

[28] Guevara's Congo diaries were intended to be a follow-up to the diary he had written of the more successful campaigns in the Sierra Maestra and at Santa Clara – 'Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria : Cuba' – but a third instalment on the 1966/67 Bolivian campaign was never written as he was executed almost immediately after capture. Guevara's diary of the Bolivian campaign – which he scrawled in a small notebook – was nevertheless published, and is one of the most common books you can find in Havana's daily book fair in the Plaza de Armas.

the Congo operation's many short-comings, including his own, those of his unreliable Congolese allies and even those of the African revolutionaries he disparagingly referred to as 'Freedom Fighters' who had rejected his proposal in Dar-es-Salaam. There were few crumbs of consolation for Guevara who had seen seven months of strenuous effort come to nothing and the guerrilla movement he had backed soundly defeated, and he was left bitterly disillusioned by African tribal politics and the wastefulness of the whole enterprise (six Cubans had died). Even before the boat which evacuated him and his forces from Kibamba had docked in Tanzania, Guevara had already set his sights back on the Bolivian operation which MOE had been planning since early 1964,[29] but he felt unable to return to Cuba as by now his letter of resignation was in the public domain. Castro had read it out at the founding congress of the PCC (Cuban Communist Party) in early October 1965 – probably as a means of quashing persistent rumours that Guevara had been removed in a coup – but the timing could not have been worse for Guevara as only three weeks later his outer base camp had been overrun by Hoare's mercenary force, triggering the collapse of the entire Congo operation. Having publicly vowed to fight the revolution across the world, Guevara was not prepared to return to Cuba with his tail between his legs unless it was to command another guerrilla operation.[30]

It is also likely, however, that Guevara was not up to facing the dozens of African revolutionary delegates arriving in Havana to attend what was purportedly his brain-child – the Tricontinental Conference – in January 1966.[31] By gathering together the world's most famous (some might say most notorious) revolutionary leaders of the time, the Cuban regime was making a bold bid to assume the overall leadership of the global revolutionary movement, and it was thus deeply ironic that the man who had given birth to Cuba's particular model of internationalism was not present for the conference, missing what would prove to be the very peak of Cuba's 'internationalist'

[29] Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.670. Clearly the idea of returning to run the Bolivian operation had been at the back of Guevara's mind throughout the dispiriting campaign in the Congo.
[30] Guevara may also have feared his reception in Havana after the ministries he had created – in particular the INRA (which oversaw the controversial land reforms and expropriations in the Revolution's early years) – had been purged of his supporters.
[31] The First Conference of Solidarity for the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America met from 2-15 January 1966, and is usually referred to simply as the 'First Tricontinental Conference'.

phase in the 1960s. More than 150 African delegates attended (out of 512)[32] – among them many who had personally warned Guevara against launching the Congo operation – and he chose to stay away from the conference, leaving Tanzania in late February for Czechoslovakia where he remained until July, resisting all attempts to entice him back to Cuba. When he did eventually give in, it was under the single condition that he could begin immediate preparations to launch the guerrilla operation in Bolivia. Conceived along similar lines as the doomed Masetti column in 1964, Guevara planned to set up a 'guerrilla madre' in Bolivia which would later irradiate out guerrilla cells across Latin America, eventually setting the continent ablaze with revolution. For Guevara, now 38, it was to be the last throw in his attempt to prove by example that his model of guerrilla warfare – 'foquismo' – could work in Latin America, and his impatience to launch the operation led him to overlook many crucial weaknesses in his choice of Bolivia, weaknesses which would prove fatal.[33]

## Guevara's final guerrilla operation in Bolivia, March-October 1967

In October 1966 Guevara departed for La Paz (via Eastern Europe and Brazil) disguised as an Uruguayan businessman, and in early 1967 he took command of the mostly Cuban guerrilla force in south-eastern Bolivia. But before the guerrillas had time to familiarise themselves with local terrain their camp was discovered by the Bolivian army, and from then on Guevara's force was effectively on the run for the next seven months. The CIA was called in by La Paz to train up a special counter-insurgent force, and after Guevara made the fatal error of splitting his forces the Bolivians were able to keep the two columns apart, annihilating the smaller one on 26

[32] Ratliff, op. cit., p.144.

[33] In particular Cuban intelligence had failed to appreciate the popularity of the new military ruler of Bolivia, President Barrientos, who came to power in more or less democratic elections in July 1966 (ironically the very month Guevara arrived back in Cuba and began feverish preparations to launch the Bolivian operation). A native Quechua speaker, Barrientos was popular among the Indian population and had already carried out significant land reform in the Santa Cruz area in which Guevara planned to launch his guerrilla struggle. Thus there was little support for Guevara and his guerrillas in southern Bolivia, and during the entire campaign not a single Bolivian peasant joined the guerrillas. Guevara's campaign was also hindered by poor intelligence (most of his Cuban troops had learnt Quechua only to find out that the main language in southern Bolivia is Guaraní), betrayal by dozens of deserters, and Guevara's ill health (caused by acute asthma) which by the final days had reduced him to riding on a donkey. In retrospect the entire campaign (March-October 1967) more resembles a seven-month-long retreat through hundreds of miles of Bolivian wilderness than a military offensive, although this is not the picture painted by the Cuban government's propaganda department.

August and then closing on in Guevara, his acute asthma slowing down the Cubans' progress. Eventually on 8 October he was captured near the small settlement of La Higuera, and after being held overnight in the schoolroom he was summarily executed the following morning – under direct orders from the Bolivian High Command.[34] The death of Che Guevara quite literally marked the death of the internationalist ideal he had championed for nearly nine years, and within months the Cuban government dramatically scaled down its guerrilla operations overseas – particularly in Latin America – as Castro's confrontation with the Soviet Union reached its peak (see below). With Guevara now an official martyr to the revolutionary cause, the Cuban regime immediately set about constructing an elaborate myth around the man and his arguably few achievements,[35] creating what Castro claimed at a candle-lit vigil on 18 October was the ideal model for Cuba's children.[36] The reality, however, was that Guevara's internationalism was starting to prejudice Cuban-Soviet relations, and following the serious clash with Moscow in 1968 'internationalism' would completely disappear from the Cuban political agenda, remaining dormant until the military intervention in Angola in 1975 (see Chapter 7).

## The Cuban mission in Brazzaville (1965-67)

Despite the collapse of Guevara's guerrilla operation in the Congo, the Cuban mission in Brazzaville had nevertheless continued, and following the arrival of the main contingent of military instructors on 23 August 1965 it began work on its principal mission: namely to shore up Massemba-Débat's government against an imminent invasion. The bulk of the 250-man Cuban force therefore started training the

[34] Guevara is said to have been very composed when his executioner entered the room, and when he saw the man's arm was shaking (some versions say that the Bolivian army had got him drunk first) he shouted '¡Tira, cobarde! Sólo matas a un hombre' ('Shoot, coward! You're only killing a man'), before being shot through the legs. He then pushed his clenched fist into his mouth so as not to scream, and was killed shortly afterwards by a second burst of machine-gun fire.

[35] It is worth noting that of the many Latin American guerrilla movements launched and supported by the Cubans during the 1960s, not a single one managed to overthrow the regime it was fighting against, the majority being overwhelmed by the wave of military dictatorships which swept into Latin America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. MOE's only (indirect) success was in having trained the Nicaraguan guerrilla Rodolfo Romero who later founded the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, more commonly known as the 'Sandinistas') which eventually overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979 (Anderson, op. cit., p.397).

[36] The motto of the Cuban 'pioneros' – a sort of Revolutionary Scout movement to which all Cuban children belong – is still 'seremos como el Che' ('We will be like Che').

Congolese militia – or CDC (Civil Defence Corps) – and over the next two years they built it into a force capable of withstanding any invasion from Kinshasa,[37] at the same time providing Massemba-Débat with a military force independent of the army which was loyal to him personally.[38] In reaction to the sudden overthrow of their closest African ally – Ben Bella – in a coup on 19 June 1965, the Cubans also set up a special 'Presidential Guard' for Massemba-Débat, a decision which was to become a hall-mark of all Cuban military missions in Africa.[39] With army coups and political assassinations becoming ever more frequent in the late 1960s, Cuba would routinely set up special units of elite Cuban officers to protect the governments of their many different African allies (a practice continued to this day in Angola),[40] and this special unit would prove crucial to the survival of Massemba-Débat one year later when disgruntled Congolese army officers tried to overthrow him (see below). The loss of Ben Bella in Algeria was nevertheless a serious blow to Cuba's operations in Africa, and relations with the new regime under the former Vice-President Houari Boumedienne were initially cool, leading to a downgrading in the Cuban military mission in Algiers.[41] Thus for the next two years Brazzaville would become the effective centre of Cuban operations in Africa, and on his return from the 2nd Military Region Moracén was given the additional duty of meeting with the various African revolutionary movements Cuba was supporting at the time.[42]

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[37] Some writers have put the number of Cubans in Brazzaville as high as 700 by May 1966 (e.g. Valdés in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.91), but this is contradicted by consistent evidence from Cuban sources which puts the total number of Cubans in Brazzaville at no more than 250.

[38] William M LeoGrande's chapter entitled 'Cuban-Soviet Relations and Cuban Policy in Africa', in Carmelo Mesa-Lago & June S Belkin (ed.s), Cuba in Africa, Center for Latin American Studies, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh (PA), 1982, p.19.

[39] Claims by Valdés that the 'Presidential Guard' in Brazzaville was made up of 300 hand-picked Cubans seem grossly exaggerated (Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.91). Given that the entire Cuban force in the whole of Congo-Brazzaville numbered no more than 250 men, it is extremely unlikely that the 'Presidential Guard' would have been exclusively Cuban or anywhere near as numerous. It is more likely that the force was made up of élite Congolese troops under the command of a core of senior Cuban officers.

[40] The Cuban 'Presidential Guard' in Guinea was later to save the life of President Sékou Touré during a Portuguese commando raid on 22 November 1970. Rafael Moracén Limonta later set up and ran the Cuban unit which acted as Neto's personal 'Presidential Guard' in Angola. This unit continued to serve the next president José Eduardo dos Santos from late 1979 onwards and – despite Cuban denials – is still operational in the Futungo de Belas palace in Luanda, the majority of its personnel officially being registered as gardeners and maintenance men (author's interview with military source in Luanda, March 1998).

[41] Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.91.

[42] Moracén in Báez, op. cit., p.264. It is interesting to note that the Cuban instructors were present in Brazzaville on 12 November 1965 when leaders of a rival MPLA faction – Matias Miguéis and José Miguel – were captured trying to make their way to Léopoldville. The two dissidents were taken to the

## The 'Camilo Cienfuegos Column', 1966

Shortly after the Congolese militia began its re-training programme, the Cuban instructors started work on their third mission in Brazzaville – to recruit and train a reinforcement column for the MPLA's stranded 1st Military Region.[43] All of the MPLA's guerrilla recruits were concentrated in Brazzaville for selection (including many of those who had been training with the Cubans in the CIR at Dolisie), and around 100 of them were chosen to make up the guerrilla column, undergoing intense training under the command of the highly-experienced Moracén who had been called down from Cabinda to oversee the operation. All of the uniforms, supplies and weaponry – including the MPLA's first automatic rifles and RPG's (rocket-propelled grenade-launchers) – were provided by Cuba itself,[44] although it is likely that some of the guerrillas also used weaponry provided by the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.[45] During late 1965 and early 1966 the Cubans helped the MPLA smuggle most of this weaponry into Congo-Kinshasa – burying it in designated dumps close to the Angolan

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MPLA camp near Dolisie (Loubomo) where they were tried and executed, dealing Viriato da Cruz's faction a blow from which it never recovered (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.157). Although it is certain the Cubans would have been aware of these goings-on (several instructors were, after all, based in the MPLA camp), whether they had any involvement is not known.

[43] My account of the 'Camilo Cienfuegos Column' is taken from interviews with Jorge Risquet in Jaime & Barber (op. cit.) & Deutchmann (op. cit. pp.2-5), Nancy, op. cit., p.60 & Marcum, op. cit., p.176.

[44] The column's weaponry was sent directly from Cuba, although none of it was of Cuban manufacture (the FAR used almost exclusively Soviet- or Eastern European-manufactured weaponry). Jorge Risquet (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.3) later described the Angolan guerrillas as "[w]ell trained and well armed... equipped with automatic rifles, a few rocket launchers, and other weapons".

[45] Yugoslavia was to remain the MPLA's most faithful backer, continuing to provide military supplies throughout the 1960s and early 1970s even after the OAU and Soviet Union had withdrawn their backing (author's interview with Paulo Jorge). Thus Soviet aid – which in the late 1970s would escalate to gargantuan proportions – was only one small part of what the MPLA was receiving at the time, and the MPLA was still keen to look elsewhere for support. According to Jorge Risquet: "[Soviet military aid] wasn't co-ordinated [with Cuban aid]. It was an independent thing. [The MPLA] had Soviet arms there. They had AK's, munitions – not huge amounts nor huge weapons, because there weren't that many combatants. Cabinda was small, as you know. But the Soviet Union gave them material support, in the form of weapons and we gave them help in the form of men, instructors, and in weaponry as well because we armed the columns ourselves. They were Soviet weapons, but brought over from Cuba. They were our weapons although they were Soviet-made... Cuba's relationship with the MPLA was bilateral, not trilateral. It was bilateral. Just like in Angola where they also received help from Algeria, Tanzania; Yugoslavia was one of the biggest suppliers for them. There were some countries which helped the MPLA a little more, some a little less. Each offer for aid was bilateral – it was a matter for the MPLA and the country in question. It wasn't an international aid conference" (author's translation from Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.336).

border[46] – and shortly before the column completed its training in early 1966 the Angolan guerrillas voted to name themselves the 'Camilo Cienfuegos Column' in honour of the Cuban commander Kindelán (who had served with Cienfuegos in the Revolutionary War). The column was placed under the command of 'Monstro Imortal' (Jacob Alves Caetano), a rising star in the MPLA who had narrowly survived a UPA ambush in April 1963, and whose combat experience and knowledge of the terrain would prove crucial to the column's chances of success.[47] During the guerrillas' training an envoy from the 1st Military Region had arrived in Brazzaville with desperate requests for aid,[48] and thus it was with a redoubled sense of purpose that the column set out from Brazzaville some time around May 1966.

Ironically, the most serious danger facing the MPLA guerrillas was not from the Portuguese counter-insurgency forces but from their compatriots in the FNLA who viewed northern Angola as their unique area of operations, and who had ruthlessly suppressed all MPLA activity there since late 1961. Using false identity papers the Cubans had obtained from the Brazzaville regime, Monstro Imortal's group made the crossing from Brazzaville to Kinshasa disguised as locals – a fairly easy task as thousands of people crossed 'the Pool' every day to trade goods and visit their families on the other side. Regrouping near the border with Angola, the column then picked up its weapons from secret caches and began the long trek through northern Angola to the 1st Military Region's HQ at Nambuangongo (200 miles south-west of them). Their arrival there two months later was a huge morale boost for the beleaguered guerrillas of the 1st Military Region, although it is unclear whether the

[46] Despite repression from the Léopoldville regime, the MPLA managed to maintain a secret base in Songololo (13 miles north of the border with Angola's Zaire province), and it was near there where the column's weapons were buried (Nancy, op. cit., p.63).

[47] Monstro Imortal, originally from Piri in the Dembos region, had been trained in Brno (Czechoslovakia) and later went on to command the 1st Military Region from 1966-1970. He was then sent for further training to Yugoslavia, and later served in Cabinda before being elected to the MPLA Politburo and appointed army Chief of Staff in 1974 (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.387, n345). The close friendship he developed with Nito Alves while fighting in the 1st Military Region would have serious repercussions for the MPLA following independence (see Chapter 6).

[48] On 15 November 1965 the commanders of the 1st Military Region unilaterally sent a volunteer – Domingos Luís António – to make the hazardous journey from Nambuangongo to Brazzaville to request desperately-needed supplies and reinforcements. However, his efforts were to be wasted as by the time he arrived in Brazzaville preparation of the first relief column was already underway (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), op. cit., n346, p.387).

column survived the journey from the Congolese border completely unscathed.[49] The column brought the first news from the outside world for nearly four years, supplies and sophisticated weaponry, and perhaps most importantly 100 freshly-trained and well-armed guerrillas who would seriously alter the military balance in the region. Within days of their arrival the FNLA had been forced to release several prominent MPLA partisans it had been holding for months, and guerrilla activity against the Portuguese quickly picked up, prompting another 180 locals to volunteer to join the guerrillas (they were sent to Dolisie for training). The resounding success of the Camilo Cienfuegos Column would encourage the Cubans to train a second relief column later that year, although they could not have realised at the time that the man they sent to the Dembos – Monstro Imortal – would later turn against Neto and the Cubans, joining forces with Nito Alves to launch a bloody coup attempt in May 1977 (see Chapter 6).

**Cuba & the MPLA plan to wind down the Brazzaville operation (summer 1966)**

As a result of the good working relationship between the Cuban commanders and the MPLA leadership in Brazzaville, more formal political ties began to emerge, and in January 1966 the MPLA attended the Cuban-sponsored Tricontinental Conference in Havana as the only Angolan delegation (the FNLA had been discounted for not being a 'genuine' revolutionary movement).[50] African delegates dominated the conference – reflecting the importance Cuba expected Africa's many liberation wars to play in the struggle against 'American neo-imperialism' – and following the conference the Cubans founded OSPAAAL (Organización de Solidaridad de los Pueblos de Ásia, África y América Latina, Organisation of Solidarity between the Peoples of Asia,

[49] Although official Cuban and Angolan sources maintain the Camilo Cienfuegos Column made it to Nambuangongo without loss. Marcum (The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), op. cit., p.176) notes an attack by the FNLA on an MPLA reinforcement column en route to Nambuangongo in May 1966 which left 32 guerrillas dead. If this was Monstro Imortal's column and it had originally numbered 100 men, it may explain why Marcum notes there were only 72 of them when they arrived in the 1st Military Region. He also dates their arrival as September 1966 (rather than July). No information on the exact numbers of guerrillas in the column is currently available.

[50] Elected chair of the CONCP (Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas, Conference of Nationalist Organisations from the Portuguese Colonies) for the Conference, the MPLA chose Luís de Azevedo from their large delegation to speak on their behalf. Viney (op. cit., p.184) asserts that Neto was part of the Angolan delegation during the Tricontinental, but all other accounts date his visit to Cuba as the following summer, and this appears to be confirmed by other evidence.

Africa and Latin America), an official body to coordinate cooperation between the world's revolutionary movements.[51] The MPLA's election to its Executive Committee seemed to signal a tightening of the alliance with Cuba,[52] but appearances were deceptive as during the conference Castro had adopted a new African protégé – Amílcar Cabral of the PAIGC (Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo-Verde, African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde) – whisking him off for a three-day tour of the Sierra Maestra immediately after the conference closed. The PAIGC had launched its war against the Portuguese in Guiné (modern-day Guinea-Bissau) in January 1963, and by 1965 had taken over nearly 40% of its territory, its charismatic leader Amílcar Cabral rapidly establishing himself as a leading revolutionary figure in Africa. Attracted by his growing reputation, Guevara had met with Cabral in mid-January 1965 during his tour of Africa, and following promises of military aid in May 1965 the first military supplies had been sent to the movement as part of 'Operación Triángulo' (see Chapter 1).

By the time Cabral arrived in Havana to attend the Tricontinental Conference Castro was keen to upgrade the Cuban-PAIGC military alliance, and he offered Cabral a small contingent of Cuban military instructors to train the PAIGC guerrillas in nearby Guinea-Conakry, hoping they could build on the liberation movement's already considerable success against the Portuguese. After Guevara's dispiriting failure in the Congo – and with no visible improvement in the MPLA's Cabinda insurgency – Castro was keen to find a more reliable African ally with a greater chance of success, and following Cabral's visit Cuba launched a military mission to Conakry modelled on the contemporary operation in Brazzaville.[53] In May the first five Cuban military

[51] OSPAAAL has been described as "Cuba's first stable 'front organisation' to support revolution" (Domínguez, op. cit., p.270). The first 12-member secretariat contained representatives from Syria, the UAR, Guinea-Conakry, North Korea, revolutionary movements from Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Congo-Kinshasa, the liberation movements of Portuguese Africa, the Vietcong, and the moderate movements in Puerto Rico and Chile. Following the Tricontinental Conference the Organización Latino-Americana de Solidaridad (OLAS) was founded in Havana, holding its first and only conference from 21 July to 10 August 1967. However, following Guevara's death in Bolivia the organisation languished before being absorbed into OSPAAAL in 1968.

[52] The MPLA's key participation in OSPAAAL was confirmed two years later when Paulo Jorge (one of the MPLA's most prominent External Representatives) was elected chairman of OSPAAAL, holding the position in Havana from March 1968 until November 1969 (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[53] The Cubans had originally intended to run the operation from Accra, but following the overthrow of President Nkrumah on 24 February 1966 they were forced to find another location. Brazzaville was

instructors arrived in Conakry to form the fledgling MMCG (Misión Militar Cubana en Guiné, Cuban Military Mission in Guinea-Bissau), and by June this had risen to a contingent of around 40-50 instructors (backed by seven doctors) which was to remain more or less constant throughout the next eight years.[54] Mirroring its sister operation in Brazzaville, MMCG also set up an elite 'Presidential Guard' to protect the Guinean President Sékou Touré who was openly supporting the PAIGC, and five years later this unit would save his life when Portuguese commandos raided Conakry in an attempt to assassinate him.[55] As a natural consequence of the burgeoning mission to the PAIGC, the focus of Cuban internationalism in Africa started to shift away from Brazzaville – then the largest Cuban military mission in Africa – and onto Conakry which was shaping up to become the centre for Cuba's African operations, and thus by the time Neto arrived for his first official visit to Cuba in the summer of 1966 the Cubans were already preparing to scale down the Brazzaville operation.

Unknown to the Cubans, however, the MPLA was also considering pulling out of Brazzaville and transferring its headquarters to Lusaka, having decided to stake its future success on the fledgling 3rd Military Region (the 'Eastern Front') which had just been launched by Daniel Chipenda in Moxico.[56] Recognising that Brazzaville was poorly located for supporting the stranded 1st Military Region – with more than

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considered too far away to be practical, and therefore the Cubans chose Conakry, having already established a good relationship with its president Sékou Touré.

[54] By April 1967 the contingent had risen to 108, including 38 who had been sent to oversee the training of Sékou Touré's militia, but Touré lost interest and these extra men were withdrawn the following year. The Portuguese first became aware of the presence of Cuban military instructors fighting alongside the PAIGC guerrillas (the only foreign soldiers allowed by Cabral to fight with the PAIGC) in February 1967. Their fears were finally confirmed when a Cuban officer – Captain Pedro Rodríguez Peralta – was captured in combat by Portuguese colonial forces in Guiné on 18 November 1969. He was later sentenced to 10 years in prison, only finally being released on 16 September 1974 by the new left-wing Portuguese government (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., pp.48-51, 54, 61 & 74-75).

[55] The raid – code-named Operação Mar Verde (Operation Green Sea) – was carried out by a force of 640 Portuguese troops under the command of Captain Alpoim Calvão. Captain Calvão began planning the raid in September 1969 and was finally authorised to carry it out by General Spínola and the Portuguese Prime Minister, Marcello Caetano, on 11 November 1970 (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.57). Probably in response to this raid, Cuba and its African allies (principally Algeria and Guinea-Conakry) decided to increase their support for the PAIGC and the MPLA in the face of the increased Portuguese threat. This led to the issuing of a joint Cuban-Algerian communiqué on 14 July 1971 which stated that: "The two delegations analysed African problems and agreed on the need to step up aid to the movements for liberation in the countries struggling against colonialism" (quoted in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., pp.95-96).

[56] The 'Eastern Front' was officially launched on 18 May 1966 with an attack on a Portuguese patrol in Moxico.

200 miles of hostile terrain separating the two – and that the Cabinda front was unlikely to develop into a successful insurgency, the MPLA leadership had decided to re-launch its ailing insurgency in eastern Angola. With easy infiltration routes from rear-bases in western Zambia – and a large local African population in Moxico – the 'Eastern Front' seemed to offer far greater chances of success,[57] and thus by the time Neto and Hoji Ya Henda (who was accompanying him) met with Castro for the first time in Havana, both sides were thinking of cutting back their military operations in Brazzaville.[58] The meeting between Castro and Neto was nevertheless highly significant – representing the peak of Cuban-MPLA alliance in the 1960s – and a loyal friendship rapidly developed between the two men which would endure the often traumatic years which were to follow for them both, proving a life-line for Neto in his most desperate hour (see next chapter).[59] The success of the Cuban training programme in Brazzaville was discussed – and in particular the 'Camilo Cienfuegos Column' which had brought the first major reinforcements to the 1st Military Region in nearly five years – and it is likely that it was during this meeting that Castro authorised the training of a second MPLA relief column (which would later become the doomed 'Kamy Column').

**Cuba sets up an advanced guerrilla training programme for the MPLA in Cuba**

Keen to maintain the close working relationship they had developed with the MPLA, the Cubans offered to move their contingent of guerrilla instructors from Brazzaville to Zambia where they could train the large numbers of Angolan recruits gathering in

[57] It was also easier to send supplies and reinforcements to the 1st Military Region from the Eastern Front rather than from Brazzaville, infiltrating the columns through Malanje and Bié. Although much further geographically, the journey from the Eastern Front avoided FNLA territory altogether, and in 1970 the MPLA would send the 'Benedito Column' from Moxico to reinforce the Dembos (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[58] The exact date of Neto & Hoji Ya Henda's trip to Havana has not been recorded in any of the official sources available, but it would appear that the trip took place before Captain Ngouabi's abortive coup attempt in June 1966 (see below).

[59] Suggestions that the Cubans preferred Hoji Ya Henda over Neto have been strenuously denied by the Cuban regime and are not supported by any evidence other than rumour (see Risquet's lengthy denial in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., pp.338-339). At the time of the trip to Havana, Henda was General Co-ordinator of the MPLA's Military Commission and commander of the 2nd Military Region. Following the trip, Henda left Congo-Brazzaville for the 'Eastern Front' where he was killed on 14 April 1968 in an attack on the Portuguese barracks at Karipande (Domingo Amuchástegui Álvarez, XX Años del

the MPLA's rear-bases east of the Angolan border, an offer gratefully received by Neto. But the Zambian government vetoed the move – fearing retaliatory action from its anti-Communist neighbours – and instead the Cubans proposed setting up a new training programme for experienced MPLA cadres in Cuba itself.[60] The idea was that the most promising MPLA guerrillas who had completed their basic training and had at least some battle experience) would be sent to Cuba's remote Escambray mountains for advanced technical and guerrilla training in the LCB Lucha Contra Bandidos 'Fight Against Bandits' or counter-insurgency operations , enabling them to return to the 'Eastern Front' as military instructors in their own right.[6] If the programme were successful the MPLA could thus meet its own training needs within a few years, obviating the need for Cuban instructors in parts of Africa where they were not always welcome. Accordingly, the following October the first group of 90 MPLA cadres arrived in Cuba to begin seven months of intensive training, and in the summer of 1967 they would return to the 'Eastern Front' to begin work as military instructors there.[62] Thus Neto and Henda's visit to Havana in the summer of 1966 – which has often been depicted by the Cuban and MPLA regimes as the moment when their alliance was solidified at the highest levels – actually marked the moment when it started to wane, and over the next six years Cuban-MPLA ties would gradually weaken until by the time of Castro's visit to Africa in May 1972 they had once more been reduced to low-level contacts see below .

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inicio de la lucha armada en Angola, Facultad de Historia y Ciencias Sociales. Instituto Superior Pedagogico 'Enrique Jose Varona', Havana, 1981, p.108 .

[60] President Kaunda's government was still fairly new and weak 'ndependence only came in October 1964) and given Zambia's geographical location – flanked by Mobutu's Congo-Kinshasa to the north and Ian Smith's Southern Rhodesia later Zimbabwe to the south – he was anxious not to antagonise his neighbours by placing Cuban troops near their borders. Jorge Risquet later explained: "[Cuba] didn't even have an embassy ['n Zambia]. The Ambassador of Zambia to the UN was also the Ambassador to Cuba... [The Zambians] couldn't get involved with Cuban volunteers, because Cuban volunteers weren't like sending Nigerian volunteers, you understand? Which is to say that Cuban volunteers meant real war. They presaged a progressive and revolutionary orientation, so a Cuban is not seen as the same as another foreigner... We were happy to go, but the MPLA itself said the conditions weren't right" (author's translation from Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.338 .

[61] Wolfers & Bergerol op. cit., p.28) assert that Castro offered Cuban military aid and possibly troops) to the MPLA, but Neto turned this down. They may be referring to the fact that Zambia had told the MPLA that they would not permit Cuban troops 'n Zambia, so Neto was unable to accept. Cuban sources suggest that the MPLA would have liked to have had Cuban troops here for example, Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.337).

## The attempted coup against Massemba-Débat, 28 June 1966

Following Neto and Henda's return to Brazzaville, the Cuban-MPLA alliance underwent its first serious test when on 28 June disaffected officers loyal to Captain Marien Ngouabi launched an attempted coup against Massemba-Débat's government. Ngouabi was a popular figure in the Congolese army and had recently been demoted by the Congolese president who viewed him (quite rightly it would turn out) as a potential threat to his power, but this action had inflamed Ngouabi's supporters in the army and when Massemba-Débat left for a trip to Madagascar in late June they seized the opportunity to overthrow his government. With support from the elite paratrooper regiment, the Congolese army and gendarmes quickly took control of central Brazzaville, holding the chiefs of security and the army prisoner while most of the members of Massemba-Débat's government fled to the Cuban compound near the sports stadium for protection.[63] At the time it was rumoured that the Congolese army resented the Cubans' presence in Congo-Brazzaville and was demanding their repatriation[64] – probably as a result of their training programme which was creating an alternative military force loyal to Massemba-Débat alone – and Cuban personnel acted quickly to contain the coup, siding with their allies in the MPLA, the CNL and the Brazzaville government. Cuban involvement in suppressing the coup was only natural, as Brazzaville was not only Cuba's principal military base in Africa at the time, but it was also the MPLA's headquarters and the training centre for the CNL's last remaining guerrilla front, and the continued presence of all three parties in Brazzaville depended on the current regime's survival.

Calling together all the available forces under their command – the militia, the MPLA & CNL guerrillas and the Cuban training contingent – the Cuban commanders determined to crush the coup, if possible without any bloodshed.[65] They were greatly

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[62] Ratliff, op. cit., p.144 & Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.20. The returning MPLA instructors were posted both to the Cabinda and Eastern Fronts to train MPLA recruits, most of them operating from camps in liberated areas of the Cazombo salient (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[63] Moracén in Báez, op. cit., p.263 & Nelson P Valdés, 'Cuba y Angola: Una Política de Solidaridad Internacional', Estudios de Ásia y África, Vol. XIV, No. 4, Mexico, October-December 1979, p.614.

[64] Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.125

[65] Risquet later said: "In Brazzaville we managed to defeat the attempted coup without spilling blood. That is the art to doing it. Because crushing coups with violence is much easier, avoiding coups with

hampered, however, by their lack of manpower – the majority of the militia still not having completed its training while much of the Cuban contingent was based in Pointe-Noire (250 miles west of Brazzaville) carrying out support missions – and they had the additional disadvantage that nearly all of their heavy weaponry was situated in camps outside Brazzaville. Moracén – who was at the time training the guerrillas of the future 'Kamy Column' at the Kimongo base – was immediately called to Brazzaville to assist in the operation, and one platoon each of MPLA and CNL guerrillas was formed under the respective commands of Henda and Mukudi (the CNL commander in Brazzaville). Hoping to contain the situation before it spread outside the capital, Kindelán first sent the two MPLA-CNL platoons to secure the flank south of the railway line, after which small groups of Cubans occupied the iron bridge, the Cuban embassy, the stadium, the General Hospital and Brazzaville's principal means of communication: the radio transmitter, the railway line and the airport (where the mutinous paratrooper brigade was garrisoned). Cuban-manned road-blocks were set up at the main road intersections (Moracén commanding one of these personally), and a protective cordon was placed around the government leaders who by some accounts were hidden in the stadium. Thanks to this swift and effective action by the Cubans the mutiny was put down quickly and – to the Cuban commanders' intense relief – without bloodshed, and a few days later Massemba-Débat was able to return to Brazzaville to reassume control of his government.[66]

**Cuba extends the Brazzaville mission (August 1966)**

The coup attempt had, however, severely shaken the stability of Massemba-Débat's regime, and it was probably a major factor in the decision to extend the Cuban mission in Brazzaville four months beyond its deadline in August 1966. Although the Cubans and Congolese had originally anticipated that the mission might extend beyond one year when setting it up in early 1965, the four-month extension was nevertheless the Cubans' first experience of 'mission creep' in its African operations,

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violence is easy, but crushing a coup without spilling blood is harder... We decided to do it that way, avoiding a fratricidal struggle" (author's translation from Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.339).

[66] Also commended for their participation in putting down the coup were Rodrigo Álvarez Cambra, Rodolfo Puente Ferro, Julián Álvarez & Manuel Agramonte (Kindelán in Báez, op. cit., p.62).

and Massemba-Débat would push for a further extension in late 1966, having come to rely on the Cuban military presence to maintain his grip on power.[67] For the remainder of the Brazzaville mission the Cubans' main priority would once again be the training of the CDC which had proved ineffective in protecting the Brazzaville government against the army uprising, and efforts were re-doubled to create a militia force which could act as a counterweight to the growing power of the Congolese army. Increased anti-Cuban sentiment in the army forced Massemba-Débat to make major concessions to Ngouabi's supporters, however – several of them being reassigned to their posts following the coup to placate local opinion[68] – and over the following months Ngouabi would continue to attract support, eventually leading to a second (this time successful) coup attempt in August 1968 (see below).

## The 'Kamy Column' (1967)

Boosted by the success of the Camilo Cienfuegos Column, in October 1966 the Cubans began preparing a second relief column for the MPLA's 1st Military Region,[69] its guerrillas naming it the 'Kamy Column' after a young guerrilla martyr from the Cabinda front.[70] The 150 guerrillas who eventually made up this column were trained at the MPLA's Kalunga camp – located between Dolisie and the border with Cabinda – under the instruction of Captain Alfonso Pérez Isaac 'Winche' and Colonel Augusto Martínez Sánchez (chief of the Cuban training contingent).[71] Although the Kamy Column contained some experienced guerrilla veterans from the Cabinda front, it was for the most part made up of peasants who had no military experience at all, a factor which may have contributed to its near annihilation in the harsh conditions of

[67] The tendency for 'mission creep' would grow in Cuba's African operations, and following the intervention in Angola in November 1975, it would become the defining characteristic of 'Cuban internationalism' in Africa, converting what had been intended as a short-term mission to shore up the MPLA in Angola into a sixteen-year military occupation (see Chapter 6).
[68] Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.125.
[69] A Cuban journalist named Limbania Jiménez Rodríguez 'Nancy' was present throughout the training of this second column and interviewed the protagonists shortly before they set off. Ten years later she wrote up her notes in the book Heroínas de Angola (op. cit.).
[70] Kamy had trained in Ghana and Morocco specialising in mine-laying and ambush tactics. He was very successful against the Portuguese until in 1965 – aged 23 – he was killed when his own mine accidentally exploded (Nancy, op. cit., p.57).
[71] Captain 'Winche' later returned to Angola in 1975 and was killed in combat near Lumeje on 5 February 1976 (Nancy, op. cit., p.61).

northern Angola. The guerrillas' intensive military training lasted for 45 days, including technical instruction – in the use and maintenance of the Soviet, Chinese and Belgian weaponry they had been issued with[72] – as well as tactical, physical and political training, and was completed in early December 1966. The column was placed under the command of 'Ingo' (Benigno Vieira Lópes), an experienced veteran from the Cabinda front, and included five women from OMA (Organização da Mulher Angolana, Angolan Women's Organisation), the most famous of whom – Deolinda Rodrígues de Almeida – was already a senior figure in the MPLA leadership.[73] The Kamy Column would follow the same route taken by the Camilo Cienfuegos Column the previous year towards Nambuangongo, and in January 1967 was seen off personally by Jorge Risquet and Agostinho Neto in a ceremony at the Kalunga camp. Neto's last words to the guerrillas as they left were: "I hope that when we next embrace it will be in the interior of Angola."[74]

The Kamy Column was to have a frustrating and traumatic experience, however, as it attempted to battle through the elements and the enemy forces blocking its path through northern Angola. Although the column crossed to Kinshasa without incident and successfully met up at the secret MPLA camp at Songololo, it ran into trouble shortly after crossing into Angola at Luvo (Zaire province) on 12 January 1967 (see map).[75] Due to poor foresight by the Cuban-Angolan planners, no account had been taken of the effect that seasonal rains would have on the terrain they were travelling through, and the guerrillas were forced to abandon their initial plans to reach the M'bridge river by the end of the first week when it took the column an entire day to cross the first swollen river they encountered.[76] Wary of increased Portuguese and FNLA vigilance after the Camilo Cienfuegos column had passed through the area, the guerrillas took a different route towards Nambuangongo, but they were soon lost and wandered for twenty days, consuming all their supplies. Eventually reaching a river

[72] The weaponry included Soviet PPSh-41s, AK-47s & DP guns, Chinese bazookas and Belgian FAL rifles (Nancy, op. cit., p.61).
[73] The other four women were Irene Cohen de Brito Texeira, Lucrécia Paím, Teresa Afonso Gomes and Engrácia dos Santos (Nancy, op. cit., p.13).
[74] Author's translation from Nancy, op. cit., p.62.
[75] The march to the border which was only thirteen miles away ended up taking six hours as they were forced to take a circuitous route so as to avoid the FNLA base at Kamuna. The survivors of Ludy's column were later captured by the FNLA in this area (see below).

they believed to be the M'bridge, they were ambushed by an FNLA patrol – losing one guerrilla in the ensuing fire-fight – and when they eventually managed to cross this river they learned the dispiriting news from locals that they were in fact still two days march from the M'bridge. By the time they finally reached the river on 10 February, the column had been reduced to 119 guerrillas (15 had died of hunger, several had drowned and some had deserted),[77] and their initial attempts to cross the heavily-swollen river failed as their makeshift raft was torn to pieces and one of the guerrillas drowned (many of them didn't know how to swim).

Recognising that many of the guerrillas in the column could no longer continue, Ingo decided to split his force in two – the strongest elements (70 guerrillas) pushing on to Nambuangongo under his command, while the weakest (including the women) would attempt to struggle back to Brazzaville under the column's logistics chief, 'Ludy' (Rodrígues João Lópes). Ingo's larger column pressed on in abysmal conditions – several more guerrillas drowning as they crossed the M'bridge – and their numbers were further depleted by FNLA and Portuguese ambushes. There were scenes of great heroism – one Angolan guerrilla fighting for nearly five hours against a Portuguese patrol before using his last bullet on himself – but also of great desperation as the guerrilla force was slowly worn down by attrition.[78] Finally on 1 April 1967 – 79 days after setting out from Songololo – 21 bedraggled survivors of the 150-strong column reached the 1st Military Region.[79] It was a victory of sorts – the arrival of more guerrillas giving a boost to local morale, as did their news that the 3rd Military Region had been launched the previous May and that a fourth was being planned for the Lundas and Malanje – but it was immediately undercut by the fate of Ludy's column which was never to make it back to Brazzaville. Desperately weakened by their ordeal – and lacking even the most basic supplies – Ludy's guerrillas limped back through northern Angola, abandoning dying comrades along

[76] The M'bridge river is spelt 'Mebridege' on current maps of Angola.
[77] By this stage they had been on the move for 29 consecutive days, 21 of those without food.
[78] The guerrilla was Moisés Congo (Nancy, op. cit., p.68).
[79] Only four members of the original Kamy Column managed to survive the war, underlining the harsh living conditions and severity of the fighting in the 1st Military Region. Out of an initial population of 20,000 people, only 2,000 were still living in the Dembos by the end of the war, the remainder having died or fled the area (Nancy, op. cit., p.70).

the way.[80] When they finally reached the border with Zaire only 20 of them were still alive, and in their desperation they asked directions from the locals, not realising that they would immediately be betrayed to the nearby FNLA base at Kamuna. Only a few miles short of Songololo the guerrillas were surrounded by the FNLA and captured, and after being imprisoned briefly in Kinshasa's Kakokol prison (where they were visited by local OMA militants and relations), they were then transferred to the main FNLA base at Kinkuzu (120 miles south of Kinshasa) – after which they were never seen again.[81]

## The final extension in the Cuban mission to Brazzaville, December 1966-July 1967

The departure of the 'Kamy Column' coincided with the completion of the Cuban mission in Congo-Brazzaville, and at the end of December 1966 the bulk of the Cuban contingent was withdrawn to Cuba.[82] However, again at the request of Massemba-Débat (and also the MPLA and the CNL), sixty Cuban instructors remained behind for a further seven months to train two further columns. The first was destined to reinforce the CNL's last remaining front in northern Congo under Pierre Mulele, and was placed under the charismatic leadership of a Congolese guerrilla called Mukudi.[83] The second would be another reinforcement column for the MPLA's 1st Military Region, the severe losses of the Kamy Column (over 85% of its guerrillas had died) failing to deflect the Cuban and Angolan commanders from their mission to break the Portuguese-FNLA stranglehold, and in early 1967 Moracén began preparing a third 100-man column for infiltration into Angola. Voting to name

[80] Two guerrillas who were dying of hunger – Mabiala & Fernando Brica – managed to scribble a note that they were to be left behind before they collapsed and passed out (Nancy, op. cit., p.50).
[81] Over the following months the MPLA made strenuous efforts to get the guerrillas released, but when an OAU commission was eventually sent to the Kinkuzu base they could find no trace of them. Years later their FNLA gaolers revealed the location of the bodies buried in shallow graves near the border with Angola, and they were disinterred and reburied in Angola (Nancy, op. cit., pp.53-55). Following independence, the date of Deolinda Rodrigues's capture (2 March) was designated Dia da Mulher Angolana (Day of the Angolan Woman).
[82] On 4 September 1966 at the CONCP conference in Brazzaville, Risquet offered Amílcar Cabral several of the Cuban instructors there who were due to return to Cuba at the end of the year, but Cabral turned him down (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.61).
[83] The column led by Mukudi was intercepted by Mobutu's forces and all the guerrillas were killed. This final failure might have persuaded Mulele to give up the guerrilla war in September 1968.

themselves the 'Ferraz Bomboko Column' (after a guerrilla leader from the 1st Military Region who had died in the conflict),[84] the guerrillas were infiltrated into northern Angola in late 1967, but just like their comrades in the Kamy Column they were quickly intercepted by Mobutu's forces who arrested the guerrillas, disarmed them and imprisoned them in Kinshasa.[85] Having learned from its previous experience with the Kamy Column survivors, the MPLA launched a spirited campaign in the OAU to secure the guerrillas' release, and thanks to their efforts they were eventually freed, although without their weapons.[86] The Ferraz Bomboko Column was thus not the total failure it might appear, for many of the guerrillas – who now had first-hand combat experience – were sent directly to the 'Eastern Front' where they were to distinguish themselves over the following years.[87]

## The Cubans and MPLA withdraw from Brazzaville, July 1967-early 1968

Shortly before the dispatch of these last two reinforcement columns, the Cuban mission in Brazzaville came to a close, and in July 1967 the last sixty Cuban instructors were withdrawn to Cuba.[88] The closing-down of the Brazzaville mission signalled the start of a general retrenchment in Cuban internationalist operations overseas as the brewing dispute between Havana and Moscow reached its peak (see

[84] Ferraz Bomboko (or Bomboco) originally fought for the UPA during their March 1961 uprising, although the MPLA has always insisted that he was secretly an MPLA supporter who hid his allegiance to them for fear of his life. It was his dispatch of a five-man mission to Léopoldville to ask for reinforcements which led to the infamous 'Ferreira Incident', generally considered the start of open warfare between the UPA (later FNLA) and MPLA. Roberto later claimed Bomboko had been arrested by the UPA and executed at their Fuesse barracks, whereas the MPLA claimed he died in 1964 from tuberculosis contracted in his damp forest redoubt (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1950-1962), op. cit., pp.44 & 212-213).

[85] Van der Waals (op. cit., p.152-153) erroneously states the column was intercepted and wiped out by Portuguese security forces, whereas Risquet (who was in Brazzaville at the time) is clear that the personnel survived and went on to fight on the 'Eastern Front' (Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.337-338).

[86] Continued pressure from the OAU for Mobutu to release the weapons – which they insisted belonged to the Angolan people – eventually led to them being handed over to the FNLA, Mobutu adding sarcastically that the FNLA 'represented the Angolan people too'.

[87] Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.338.

[88] Klinghoffer erroneously states that Cuban instructors were still in Brazzaville at the time of Ngouabi's second coup (in August 1968), and that only after several months were they allowed to return (Arthur J Klinghoffer, The Angolan War: A Study in Soviet Policy in the Third World, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1980, p.50). Recent research has conclusively shown that although Cuba retained an embassy and staff in Brazzaville throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, all remaining Cuban instructors were withdrawn in July 1967 and did not return (Risquet's interview in Jaime & Barber, op. cit. & author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

below), and within a year Cuban involvement in Africa would have been reduced to the lone sixty-man mission in Conakry. The two-year mission in Brazzaville had had several tangible successes – the infiltration of the Camilo Cienfuegos Column into the 1st Military Region, the bloodless crushing of the 1966 Ngouabi coup, even the first vaccination campaign against polio to be carried out in Congo-Brazzaville[89] – but with the MPLA's move to Lusaka and the downgrading of the Cabinda Front it was clear that in the long-term the Cuban mission had been a failure. The capture and annihilation of both the Kamy and Ferraz Bomboko columns had convinced the MPLA leadership that running the war from Brazzaville was impractical, and that FNLA and Portuguese forces in northern Angola were simply too strong for any future attempt to reinforce the 1st Military Region to succeed. And in Cabinda the MPLA had finally recognised that the enclave was simply too remote, too under-populated and disproportionately garrisoned by Portuguese troops (who were protecting the vital oil installations off Cabinda city) to develop into a successful insurgency. Furthermore, despite at least eighteen months of training from the Cuban instructors the CDC had failed to emerge as an effective bulwark for Massemba-Débat, offering only token resistance when Ngouabi launched his second coup in August 1968.

In fairness to the Cubans, the outcome of the Brazzaville mission was not entirely their fault: they had responded to Neto's requests for military assistance, and it was only once their mission was well underway that they began to realise the strategic impracticality of running the MPLA's insurgency from Brazzaville. But there was little escaping the reality that after two years of close military cooperation the Cubans and Angolans were scaling down their alliance, and moving off towards opposite sides of Africa – the Cubans to Conakry, the MPLA to Lusaka – to pursue different agendas. The Cuban withdrawal was quickly followed by the MPLA leadership which moved its principal base of operations to Lusaka in early 1968, hoping to resuscitate the MPLA's faltering guerrilla insurgency on the new 'Eastern Front'. The move to Zambia was an implicit (and belated) admission of the failure of the 2nd Military Region, and the Cabinda front was immediately scaled down – although

[89] During the mission's two years 254 Congolese students were also educated in Cuba on government-

suggestions by some writers that it was shut down altogether are incorrect.[90] The MPLA continued to operate in Cabinda throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of its most famous veterans (Pepetela, later Minister of Education) using his experience there as the basis for his masterpiece, Mayombe. But the front remained limited in its effectiveness – never putting Portuguese occupation of the enclave in jeopardy – and its principal use appears to have been for training MPLA guerrillas, Paulo Jorge later describing it as a 'laboratory of revolutionary warfare'.[91]

By the time Massemba-Débat was ousted from power in a second coup led by Ngouabi in August 1968, the MPLA's move to Lusaka had been completed,[92] and from then onwards the Cuban-MPLA military alliance reverted to low-level contacts and a small guerrilla training programme in Cuba itself. The two years of close military cooperation in Brazzaville had represented the very peak of the Cuban-MPLA alliance during the 1960s, but from late 1967 onwards it gradually waned as both allies were consumed by their own internal crises, forcing each of them to retrench their positions and fight for their very survival. For Neto the illusory rise and sudden collapse of the 3rd Military Region would once again plunge the MPLA into chaos and threaten his continued leadership of the liberation movement, while for Castro the brewing dispute with the Soviet Union would lead to a dramatic show-down in 1968, and the subsequent political and economic transformation of Cuba into a Soviet-style Communist state. Indeed so intense would this period of crisis prove for both the MPLA and Cuba that by the time Castro re-emerged onto the world stage to make his first tour of Africa in May 1972, the Cuban-MPLA relationship would

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paid scholarships (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.).

[90] For example Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.: "In 1966, the MPLA withdrew its forces from Cabinda and opened a new front in eastern Angola along the Zambian border". William M LeoGrande (Cuba's Policy in Africa, 1959-1980, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1980, p.10) does note that the 2nd Military Region continued to operate, but his assertion that a handful of Cuban instructors remained with the MPLA guerrillas there after 1968 is denied outright by the Cuban government.

[91] Quoted in Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.174. Paulo Jorge briefly visited the Cabinda front in November 1969 before taking up his appointment as Chief MPLA Representative in Brazzaville which he held until July 1971 (author's interview).

[92] Neto announced in May 1968 that the transfer had been completed. Some writers have suggested that following the coup Ngouabi's put severe restrictions on the MPLA in Brazzaville, hoping to establish closer links with China (for example, Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.50). If this is true, then the MPLA's decision to move its principal base of operations to Lusaka was doubly fortunate.

have weakened significantly, reverting to the low-level diplomatic contacts which had characterised it prior to 1965 (see below).

**Cuba's clash with the Soviet Union & subsequent incorporation into the Soviet bloc (1967-72)**

Since the Cuban Missile Crisis a major confrontation had been brewing between the Cuban government and its Soviet patron, stemming primarily from Cuba's active support for dozens of Marxist-oriented guerrilla movements across Latin America. While the Soviets had been happy to tolerate the bellicose anti-American statements which issued from Havana in the early 1960s – most notably the 'Declarations of Havana' (see Chapter 1) – they were concerned that Guevara's guerrilla operations in Latin America would upset the delicate *modus operandi* they had established with the USA (which allowed them to control the majority of Latin American Communist parties from Moscow).[93] In the six years following the 'Missile Crisis' the Soviets therefore sought to extract a commitment from the Cuban government to refrain from further intervention in Latin America and to adopt a less belligerent approach towards its foreign policy, but each promise was in turn flouted quite openly by Cuba – to the increasing exasperation of its Soviet patron.[94] Hoping to weaken China's growing role as patron of the global revolutionary community,[95] in January 1966 the Soviets raised no objections to Havana hosting the Tricontinental Conference, but when Castro used the opportunity to blast the Moscow-led Latin American Communist

[93] The irony was that Cuba had originally sought out an alliance with the Soviet Union as part of an internationalist strategy which by its very nature encouraged revolution throughout Latin America (so as to gain more allies in the region), yet this very strategy was categorically opposed by the Soviet Union at the time.

[94] The Soviet-Cuban communiqué of 23 May 1963 which resulted from Castro's marathon 37-day visit was an attempt to restrain Cuban interference in Latin America, but was ignored by Che Guevara's guerrilla-training department which greatly expanded its operations in Latin America in the period following its signing. Attempts by the new Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to bring Cuba to heal appeared to bear fruit, however, when at a specially-convened Conference of Latin American Communist Parties in Havana in December 1964 Cuba agreed to a compromise resolution. Once again, however, this deal was undercut by the calling of the Tricontintental Conference in Havana in January 1966.

[95] The Soviets had hoped that Cuban criticism of China might lead to the setting up of a replacement for AAPSO (the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation) which would include Latin America but exclude China. In the end, however, the Cubans sidestepped this issue by creating an organisation parallel to the Tricontinental (OLAS) the following summer (W Raymond Duncan, The Soviet Union and Cuba: Interests and Influence, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1985, p.68).

Parties (who were not present at the conference) and stake his own claim for leadership of the world's revolutionary movements, relations with Moscow started to deteriorate. The final spark for the confrontation between Havana and Moscow came one year later, when in April 1967 Cuba published Che Guevara's sensational 'Message to the Tricontinental' which he had written in Cuba shortly before leaving for Bolivia.[96]

Apocalyptic in his vision, Guevara called on all the world's revolutionaries to rise up in a worldwide 'Inter-Continental Revolution' against global imperialism, offering his own particular interpretation of proletarian internationalism.[97] In a famous phrase which reverberated around the world he called for "two, three, many Vietnams" to sap the strength of the imperialist powers and bring on the ultimate collapse of Western capitalism,[98] concluding dramatically:

> "Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism, and a battle hymn for the people's unity against the great enemy of mankind: the United States of America. Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, may have reached some receptive ear, that another hand may be extended to wield our weapons, and that other men be ready to intone our funeral dirge with the staccato singing of the machine guns and new battle cries of war and victory."

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[96] Full translation of text from Che Guevara's 'Mensaje a los pueblos del mundo a través de la Tricontinental' is available at http://www.che-lives.com.

[97] Guevara spoke of developing "a true proletarian internationalism; with international proletarian armies, the flag under which we fight would be the sacred cause of redeeming humanity. To die under the flag of Vietnam, of Venezuela, of Guatemala, of Laos, of Guinea, of Colombia, of Bolivia, of Brazil – to name only a few scenes of today's armed struggle – would be equally glorious and desirable for an American, an Asian, an African, even a European. Each spilt drop of blood, in any country under whose flag one has not been born, is an experience passed on to those who survive, to be added later to the liberation struggle of his own country. And each nation liberated is a phase won in the battle for the liberation of one's own country. The time has come to settle our discrepancies and place everything at the service of our struggle."

[98] The choice of Vietnam as an example would prove a canny prediction by Guevara, as the following January (1968) the Vietcong launched the infamous 'Tet Offensive', attacking more than 30 Vietnamese cities (including Saigon). Although an estimated 30,000 Vietcong/North Vietnamese were killed in fighting and no cities were held for more than a few days – a military disaster by any standards – the 'Tet Offensive' nevertheless marked a turning point in American public support for the Vietnam War, and led to the first serious calls for an American withdrawal.

It was a clear and unmistakable declaration of war on the USA – and by implication on the Soviet Union's hegemony over the Latin American revolutionary movement – and within months Cuban-Soviet relations started to deteriorate sharply. Bitter discussions between Soviet Prime Minister Alexsei Kosygin and Castro in Havana in June 1967 – just as the operation in Brazzaville was winding up – underlined the polarisation between the two regimes, and following Che Guevara's sudden death in Bolivia in October they took a nose-dive.[99] Many Cubans believed (perhaps with some justification) that Guevara's force had been abandoned by Mario Monje (leader of the Bolivian Communist Party) who withdrew his support in January 1967 – allegedly under pressure from the Soviets – and as the details of Guevara's desperate last weeks began to emerge in the weeks following his execution they only seemed to confirm this view. Castro's boycott of the Soviet Union's 50th Anniversary Celebrations of the October Revolution that November signalled that a split was imminent,[100] and in January 1968 the first inklings of a serious confrontation emerged when the Soviet Union severely reduced its deliveries of petroleum to Cuba, bringing the Cuban economy to a standstill.

## The 1968 Cuban-Soviet clash

Infuriated that the Soviets were attempting to bring Cuban into line with the 'oil stick' (the Soviet Union was by then providing Cuba with 99.3% of its petroleum needs),[101] on 28 January Castro retaliated by arresting and imprisoning an alleged '*micro-*

[99] Kosygin had stopped off in Havana on his return from the USA where he had held talks with President Johnson, aimed at reducing superpower tensions. There were tense exchanges between Castro and Kosygin – the Cubans objecting to the Soviets' open search for détente with the USA, while the Soviets complained bitterly about continued Cuban support for various guerrilla groups across Latin America which had drawn considerable criticism from Johnson during his talks with Kosygin (Rafael Fermoselle, The Evolution of the Cuban Military: 1492-1986, Ediciones Universal, Miami, 1987, p.372). Castro also publicly criticised the Soviet Union for not adequately helping its Arab allies during the disastrous Six Day War which had broken out that summer (5-10 June 1967).

[100] Owing to Imperial Russia's use of the Julian calendar, the 'October Revolution' of 24-25 October 1917 actually took place on 6-7 November 1917. A minor Cuban official – the Minister of Public Health – was sent instead of Fidel Castro, and he did not speak at the celebrations.

[101] Domínguez, op. cit., pp.72-73. Cuban suspicions were confirmed when the 2nd Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Havana was bugged while joking that the reduced petroleum deliveries could put pressure on Cuba, and that Cuba was ripe to be another Hungary, i.e. for a direct Soviet military intervention to bring it into line. This led Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to openly criticise the Soviet-bloc personnel based in Havana: "It is no longer possible to allow a situation where many officials from the

faction' in the PCC led by Aníbal Escalante.[102] Escalante was an old-style Communist, having led the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) before the Cuban Revolution, and as such was a figurehead for the more orthodox Communists in the PCC who looked towards Moscow rather than Fidel Castro for their ideological direction.[103] The arrest and imprisonment of this 'micro-faction' was a thinly-disguised purge of the pro-Moscow elements in the Cuban government,[104] and in retaliation the Soviets withdrew their ambassador – Alex Alexiev – who was posted to Madagascar, allegedly as a punishment for being too sympathetic to the Cubans. Slowly the Soviet oil embargo began to bite – creating a crazed siege mentality which spawned dozens of impractical and often ludicrous schemes to escape the Soviet economic stranglehold[105] – but by the end of the summer Castro was forced to back down, and on 23 August 1968 he took the opportunity of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to signal his compliance.[106] Admitting that many Cubans were emotionally opposed to the Soviet intervention, Castro nevertheless declared that they should "accept the bitter necessity that required sending those troops into

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government and party organisations from the socialist countries work against the Cuban Revolution even here in this country" (quoted in Brenner & Blight, op. cit.).

[102] Most sources quote 43 as the number of PCC members arrested, 35 of them eventually being convicted and imprisoned (e.g. Domínguez, op. cit., p.74). However, Brenner & Blight (op. cit.) put the number of suspects at 37, while Cuban sources give no number for those arrested and put on trial. Unknown to Escalante, prior to his arrest on 23 January he had already been tried along with his fellow accused *in absentia* at an unprecedented gathering of the PCC Central Committee (its first meeting since the party's foundation in October 1965), receiving a 15-year sentence. The choice of the date on which the announcement of the arrest was made – José Martí's birthday (28 January) – was probably significant.

[103] Escalante's close links with Moscow had been re-enforced by his extended visit there representing the Cuban government in 1962, and it may have been out of respect for the Soviets that all the traditional PSP members got better treatment in prison than their M-26-7 comrades.

[104] Brenner & Blight (op. cit.) describe the purge of Escalante and his supporters as "a direct rebuff to the Soviet Union".

[105] Among the more disastrous plans launched during 1968 was one to cultivate coffee in Havana's green belt for export to the West. For this purpose vast amounts of cheap Mexican coffee beans were imported and Havana's green belt – which had supplied the city with fruit, vegetables and dairy products since the city's foundation – was razed and replaced with coffee plantations. In scenes reminiscent of Second World War England, every available piece of earth was used for cultivation, but following the announcement of the 10 Million Ton sugar drive the 'Coffee Plan' was abandoned in its entirety. The long-term damage had been done, however, and to this day Havana suffers chronic shortages of basic foodstuffs which were traditionally met by farms in the green belt. One bizarre plan, proposed by a mysterious Frenchman called André Voisin and initiated by the Instituto de Ciencia Animal, proposed installing air-conditioning in the sheds of the entire dairy cow population so that they would produce more milk. Unsurprisingly this scheme also sank without a trace after 1968 (details from internet & author's interview with Octavio Guerra Royo, Havana, September 1999).

[106] Castro initially denounced the Soviet invasion as a 'flagrant violation' of Czechoslovak territory, but had decided on a different approach by the time he spoke on national television three days later.

Czechoslovakia",[107] in one fell swoop tarnishing his international reputation almost irreparably.[108] Castro's speech marked a turning-point in Cuban-Soviet relations – signalling the eclipse of Cuba's maverick revolutionary phase and the start of its absorption into the Soviet bloc – and over the next four years Cuba would gradually sink into the Soviet embrace, emerging in the mid-1970s with little remaining of the political and economic system which had preceded it.

## Cuba's absorption into the Soviet bloc (1972-76)

The final event which brought an end to the reckless experimentation of the 1960s – and forced Cuba to convert itself into the standard Soviet model of a Communist State – was the attempt to produce a record-breaking 10 Million Ton sugar harvest in 1970. The motivations behind launching this plan are still unclear (see Appendix 2 for full analysis), but it was a disastrous failure, the conscription of nearly all the Cuban workforce to help in the harvest wrecking what little was left of the Cuban economy.[109] Major restructuring of the island's economic and political systems would be needed to repair the damage, and following Castro's trip to the Soviet Union in June 1972 the process which became known as 'Institutionalisation' started – which was in reality little more than the 'Sovietization' of Cuba.[110] In July 1972

[107] Quoted in Henriksen, op. cit., p.61 & Domínguez, op. cit., p.76. Proof of general Cuban opposition to the invasion can be seen in popular Cuban publications of the time. In the first days following the invasion, the satirical Cuban magazine 'Pa'lante' published a cartoon showing Soviet troops marching in the direction of a sign labelled 'Czechoslovakia' whilst ignoring another one labelled 'Vietnam' pointing in the other direction. The implied criticism that the Soviets were fighting the wrong enemy was emphatic. Following Fidel Castro's public support for the invasion, however, all critical references to it disappeared from the popular media (author's interview with Víctor Veras, Havana, September 1999).

[108] LeoGrande (op. cit., p.7) argues that Castro's reasons for supporting the invasion went far beyond a simple desire to curry favour with the Soviet regime and reflected genuine concerns he had with the reforms carried out by the Dubcek government. Nevertheless, taking into account Cuba's dire position in August 1968 and the impossibility of continuing without Soviet economic support, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Cuban government – having been forced into a corner by the Soviet oil and technical embargo – was prepared to give public support for a distasteful military intervention in a Soviet client state very similar to its own as a *quid pro quo* for the re-establishment of Soviet aid.

[109] In the end only 8.5 million tons were produced, and that figure is alleged to have included husks and off-cuts. There are even rumours that the 8.5 million ton figure also included the harvest from 1969.

[110] In the orthodox Marxist-Leninist parlance of the time, the Cuban Revolution had passed through its formative phase with the PCC as the militant vanguard party, and now it was necessary to 'institutionalise' the Revolution, transforming Cuba into a recognisably Communist state. Castro was willing to contemplate such radical change only because the Soviets had pledged to safeguard his own power base in Cuba itself, indeed it was strengthened by Castro's appointment as President of Cuba in addition to his leadership of the PCC.

might abroad, and was to make possible the massive intervention in Angola in 1975. Several high-profile visits to Havana and Moscow by senior Cuban and Soviet military chiefs laid the groundwork for closer military cooperation,[114] and following Castro's Lenin Day speech in April 1970 – during which he proclaimed Cuba's readiness to establish closer military ties with the Soviet Union – a massive programme was launched to reform, re-equip and re-train Cuba's armed forces. Over the following five years the FAR, MININT and militia forces (which maintained many of the unconventional structures adopted during the guerrilla war) were re-organised along conventional Soviet lines.[115] The guerrilla rank of 'comandante' was replaced by four ranks of general (although Fidel Castro retained the absolute title of 'Comandante-en-Jefe', 'Commander-in-Chief'), the FAR was greatly expanded and the militia was disbanded.[116] In 1970 the Soviet military began re-arming the FAR, and over the next five years over $3 billion worth of Soviet weaponry was sent to Cuba – twice the amount Cuba had received in Soviet military aid over the previous decade, and all of it nominally free of charge.[117] Among the new technology incorporated into the FAR were MiG-23 fighter-bombers, T-62 tanks and BM-21 missile launchers, all of which were to prove devastatingly effective in Angola.[118]

[114] In November 1969 Soviet Minister of Defence Marshal Andrei Grechko visited Havana accompanied by the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, and this visit was returned the following April by the Chief of MINFAR Raúl Castro who spent five weeks in the Soviet Union, meeting extensively with Brezhnev.

[115] The reorganisation of the armed forces may have been the reason behind the decision (in 1972) to place MMCG under the direct command of MINFAR (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.52, n36).

[116] Officially the members of the militia were put on 'military reserve' and given the honorary title of 'sub-lieutentant'. However, they were obliged to hand in their weapons and return to their homes, which was in effect a demoblisation of the force (Fermoselle, op. cit., p.495).

[117] Duncan, op. cit., p.101.

[118] Although never officially a member of the Warsaw Pact, by exclusively using Soviet military equipment and by training its cadres in the Soviet bloc, Cuba effectively became part of the Soviet military structure and its military forces were thus an extension of Soviet military might. Although Fidel Castro has tirelessly insisted that he maintained Cuba's total independence throughout the Soviet era, when one takes into account Cuba's membership of CMEA and of the Soviet-led global Communist movement – coupled with Cuba's ceaseless championing of the Soviet cause to its allies in the Third World – it is difficult to escape the conclusion that by the mid-1970s Cuba was an integral client state of the Soviet Union.

## The effect on Cuba's international policy

Internationally Cuba visibly fell into line within the Soviet bloc, siding with the Soviet Union in the Sino-Soviet split and using what influence Cuba had in the Third World to bring more countries into the Soviet fold.[119] The most notable result of this change in policy was the total abandonment of Guevara's internationalist guerrilla-training programme for Latin America, Cuba withdrawing support for the many guerrilla movements it had been backing since the early 1960s and instead seeking a rapprochement with the very governments these guerrillas had been trying to overthrow (for example Peru, Panama and Argentina).[120] Although some African and Latin American guerrilla cadres continued to be trained in Cuba during the early 1970s, no further Cuban operations would be launched in Latin America until after the 1975 intervention in Angola, signalling the effective death of Guevara's internationalist vision for the hemisphere.[121] Speaking at a press conference in June 1969, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez defended the Cuban government's policy U-turn, declaring that Cuba's concept of armed struggle had been "misinterpreted in the belief that it means that armed struggle is indispensable in each and every country of Latin America", and citing several countries – most notably Uruguay and Chile – where Cuba now believed electoral victories for Marxist parties were possible.[122] Cuba's conciliatory approach towards Latin America soon bore fruit, leading to the first (secret) talks with the American government on restoring diplomatic relations in

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[119] This was done most controversially at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Algiers in September 1973 when Fidel Castro argued vigorously that the Soviet Union was not an imperialist power like the USA, and as such should be seen as a natural ally of the NAM members. This suggestion was by its very nature insulting to members of the NAM which had been founded specifically to avoid alignment with the superpowers and absorption into the Western or Socialist blocs.

[120] Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.200.

[121] When Loyola Guzmán (who had taken part in Guevara's Bolivian campaign) was released from prison and returned to Cuba in 1970, she found that "nobody in Cuba's secret services wanted to see her or offer her explanations for what had gone wrong in 1967, and that in his adoptive homeland Che had become an unmentionable subject" (Anderson, op. cit., p.747). Cuba only re-engaged in Latin America with the rise of the FSLN ('Sandinistas') in the late 1970s, MININT's Tony de la Guardia (who would later rise to notoriety in the late 1980s) assisting in the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979.

[122] Quoted in Duncan, op. cit., p.78. Rodríguez was later proved right when in November 1970 Salvador Allende was elected as Chile's first Marxist president.

November 1974,[123] and in July 1975 the OAS voted that Latin American countries could lift economic sanctions against Cuba (if they so wished), starting the process of Cuba's rehabilitation in Latin America.

## Effects of the new Cuban-Soviet relationship on Cuba's African policy

The immediate effect of Cuba's less belligerent approach to foreign policy was to bring about a dramatic scaling-down in Cuban internationalist aid to Africa, and within a year of the closure of the Brazzaville mission – just as the Cuban-Soviet clash was reaching its peak – only one 60-man internationalist mission remained in Africa, supporting the PAIGC from their base in Conakry.[124] Moving away from its previous policy of backing almost any African guerrilla movement which claimed to be Marxist-Leninist, the Cuban government decided to concentrate instead on improving ties with the established revolutionary regimes in Africa, most notably restoring its close alliance with Algeria whose new president Houari Boumedienne had overthrown Castro's former ally and confidant Ben Bella in June 1965.[125] Thus it was not until May 1972 – when Castro re-emerged onto the world stage to launch a tour of Africa, the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union – that high-level contacts between Cuba and the African revolutionary movement re-started, leading to a new, more cautious phase of Cuban internationalist involvement in Africa. Equally balancing the need for further diplomatic and commercial relations with the continent with the Cuban tradition of backing liberation movements there, the early 1970s were

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[123] The talks were chaired by William D Rogers, US Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, and led to the setting up of 'Interest Sections' in Havana and Washington DC on 1 September 1977, the first diplomatic representation in each country for 16 years (Domínguez, op. cit., p.227). Further talks, however, collapsed following the Soviet-Cuban intervention in Ethiopia in late 1977 (see Chapter 6).

[124] Don Burness (On the shoulders of Marti: Cuban Literature of the Angolan War, Three Continents Press, Colorado Springs (CO), 1995, p.31) & Nathaniel Davis ('The Angola Decision of 1975: A Personal Memoir', Foreign Affairs, Vol. 57, No.1, USA, Fall 1978, p.121, n8) erroneously state that by 1970 there was a contingent of c.100 Cuban troops fighting alongside the MPLA in Angola, but this is contradicted by detailed evidence from Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit.) and Paulo Jorge (author's interview).

[125] In September 1969 Cuba agreed to establish and staff a centre for training medical and public health specialists in Mostaragem (Algeria), signalling the revival of the Cuban-FLN alliance (Sergio Díaz-Briquets (ed.), Cuban internationalism in Sub-Saharan Africa, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh (PA), 1989, p.19). This was then strengthened when on 14 July 1971 both countries issued a joint statement declaring their intention to step up military aid for African independence movements (Blasier & Mesa Lago, op. cit., p.96).

a period of deepening maturity in Cuba's African policy, laying the foundations for far greater military intervention in Africa at the end of the decade. Accordingly Castro visited his most trusted African allies whilst en route to Eastern Europe, making highly-publicised stops in Conakry and Algiers where he held talks with Touré, Boumedienne and several of Africa's leading revolutionary movements (who were still keen to obtain Cuban military support).[126]

## Castro's visit to Conakry, 3-8 May 1972

The most important meetings Castro held in Conakry were with the man who had become his principal African protégé – Amílcar Cabral – and they discussed at length the progress of the PAIGC's war in Guiné and the supporting Cuban mission in Conakry. Following the appointment of the talented General Antônio Sebastião Ribeiro de Spínola as military governor of Guiné in May 1968, the PAIGC had suffered a reversal of fortune in the war, Spínola's concerted offensives recapturing much of the territory lost to the PAIGC over the previous five years.[127] The rise in Portuguese fortunes was deceptive, however, and Spínola was quick to recognise that any gains on the ground would be short-lived, and that the only lasting solution to the insurgency would be negotiations with the PAIGC. But when he suggested this idea to the Portuguese Prime Minister Marcello Caetano in 1972,[128] Caetano rejected it out of hand, putting Portugal in an awkward Catch-22 situation regarding Guiné. For if Portugal gave up what was in reality an economically-unimportant colony, it would risk aggravating the demands for independence in its more lucrative colonies of Angola and Mozambique; but if it continued fighting in Guiné it would with all

[126] Fidel Castro left Cuba on 2 May 1972, visiting Guinea, Sierra Leone & Algeria before continuing to Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia & the USSR (Duncan, op. cit., p.113). He returned to Cuba in late June 1972.

[127] Modelling their approach on a similar strategy adopted by the British during the Malaya Insurgency (1948-57), the Portuguese attempted to win the 'heart and minds' of the local population with various economic investment schemes and experiments in local political autonomy. Although Cabral later dismissed Spínola's campaign as 'smiles and blood' (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.56), it seriously undermined the PAIGC's popularity among the local Guinean population and forced a spirited counter-campaign of propaganda by the PAIGC.

[128] Marcello Caetano had taken over from Salazar in September 1968 after the ageing dictator had suffered a brain clot when his deck-chair collapsed while on holiday in Estoril (just west of Lisbon). Caetano's determination to continue with Salazar's dreams for the increasing integration of the Portuguese Empire meant that a crucial opportunity for reform was missed, hence his veto of Spínola's requests for negotiations with the PAIGC.

certainty lose, and ultimately be ejected by force. The former option – as far as Caetano was concerned – was quite out of the question, and therefore the Portuguese army was left with the task of fighting a debilitating and unpopular guerrilla war it knew it could not win in the long-run, breeding a deep resentment which would eventually erupt in the Carnation Revolution of April 1974 (see next chapter).[129] Recognising Portugal's 'Achilles Heel' in Guiné, Castro was therefore keen to step up Cuban support for the PAIGC, and within a year of his meeting with Cabral the PAIGC would have re-gained the military initiative, forcing the Portuguese back once more to the coastline.[130]

**Castro's meeting with middle-ranking MPLA representatives**

Castro's talks with the MPLA were less significant than those with the PAIGC, however, and reflected the downgrading of the Cuban-MPLA alliance following the withdrawal from Brazzaville in July 1967. Since that date the MPLA had maintained contact with the Cuban government through Cuba's African embassies – principally in Brazzaville, Conakry and Dar-es-Salaam – and through the various international organisations of which Cuba and the MPLA were both members, for example OSPAAAL (which was based in Havana).[131] This continual (if reduced) contact was

[129] What Spínola did not realise at the time, however, was that Caetano's refusal to let him negotiate with the PAIGC was based solely on his lack of confidence in Spínola's negotiating abilities and was not a categorical rejection of negotiations *per se* as a way of ending the crisis in Guiné. Unknown to Spínola, secret negotiations did take place between the Portuguese government and the PAIGC in late 1972, but they were abandoned when the PAIGC demanded that the Cape Verde islands should form part of an independent Guiné, a concession Caetano was not prepared to grant (author's conversations with Professor Fernando Rosas, Bristol, 2 November 1999). Serious negotiations on de-colonisation between Portugal and the PAIGC did not occur until after the Carnation Revolution.

[130] On 25 May 1973 Cuban troops took part in the last major battle of the war, capturing the strategically-vital Guiledje barracks which effectively brought two thirds of Guinean territory and half the population under PAIGC control, forcing the Portuguese to retrench in their capital – Bissau – and the surrounding coast-line area. The appearance of the first Soviet SAMs in early 1973 (which had been requested by Cabral during a visit to the Soviet Union in December 1972) was also a significant factor in the rise of the PAIGC's military fortunes. During 1973 at least a dozen Portuguese aircraft were shot down, ending Portuguese air superiority and forcing them to withdraw many of their garrisons from the interior. Success on the battlefield led to the recognition of the PAIGC as the only legitimate representative of the people of Guinea-Bissa and Cape Verde by the UN General Assembly on 14 November 1972, and the following September no fewer than 75 states recognised the PAIGC's unilateral declaration of independence (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., pp.78-80).

[131] Jorge Risquet later said of the Cuban-MPLA relationship after the Cuban withdrawal: "Our support was continuous, although with occasional ups and downs" (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.6). Paulo Jorge describes Cuban-MPLA relations in this period as close and continuous: "I was in Cuba from the end of March 1968 until November 1969 and I never knew of any weakening in our relations, never.

complemented by a modest military aid programme started in October 1966, in which Cuba trained small groups of experienced MPLA cadres to become future trainers themselves on the MPLA's 'Eastern Front'. In addition the Cuban government extended its scholarship programme to more Angolan students, between 1967 and 1974 training dozens of them in Cuba as economists, doctors, engineers and other specialities, among them Saydi Mingas (later Minister of Finance in the MPLA government) and Enrique dos Santos (who married a Cuban and went on to become a prominent figure in the MPLA Central Committee).[132] Thus by the time of Castro's visit to Conakry in May 1972 the MPLA's relationship with Cuba had reverted to its pre-1965 levels, and it was a middle-ranking delegation which met with the Cuban president while the MPLA's leader and commander-in-chief – Agostinho Neto – was conspicuously absent from Conakry throughout Castro's stay there.

## The collapse of the 'Eastern Front', 1970-72

Neto's absence during what was Fidel Castro's first official tour of Africa belied his ostensibly close relationship with the Cuban leader, and may have been a result of the acute political and military crisis which had befallen the MPLA by early 1972. Despite the training programme in Cuba and a significant increase in Soviet military aid,[133] the 'Eastern Front' had had mixed fortunes since the MPLA moved its headquarters to Lusaka in early 1968. Following the deaths in combat of several gifted cadres – most prominent of whom was the 1st Military Region's former

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Afterwards, I went to Brazzaville and was for a while in the 2nd Military Region, the Cabinda Front, then I was called to be the representative for the MPLA in the Congo. And throughout this time I maintained close contacts with the Cuban Embassy [in Brazzaville]. For this reason, I don't know how there could have been a weakening" (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[132] Amuchástegui, op. cit., p.198 & Risquet in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.45. The Cuban government also helped arrange scholarships for Angolan students to study in socialist countries and in friendly Western countries, such as Holland and the Scandinavian countries (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[133] On 13 April 1970 a KGB report sent to Moscow noted the decline of Chinese and American influence in Africa and saw this as an opportunity to expand Soviet influence there. Consequently it was decided to increase Soviet military aid to the MPLA, and on 24 June 1970 the Soviet Ambassador to Zambia offered Neto substantial military hardware, logistical support & political training for the MPLA. A subsequent KGB report written in November 1970 noted the Nixon administration's renewed alliance with Portugal, and concluded that Angola and Guinea-Bissau had potential strategic importance for the Soviet Union (Odd Arne Westad, 'Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974-1976: A New Pattern of Intervention', CWIHP website, Serial No. 6, Washington (DC), 1996). This newfound optimism appears to have evaporated, however, with the signing of the Basic Principles Agreement

commander Hoji Ya Henda[134] – in early 1970 the leadership had streamlined its executive committee in order to improve co-ordination for a series of dramatic large-scale offensives planned for 1971 and 1972.[135] By then – according to the Eastern Front's commander and creator Daniel Chipenda – the struggle in Moxico had reached 'Phase 2', enabling the 3rd Military Region to send out regular mobile units to broaden the struggle across Angola and disperse the Portuguese forces. The concentration of all MPLA efforts on the Eastern Front inevitably contributed to the 1st Military Region's isolation, and after a fourth relief column (sent this time from the Eastern Front) – the 'Benedito Column'[136] – was intercepted and destroyed by the Portuguese in 1970, the guerrillas were left to their fate, relying on supplies from MPLA agents in Luanda and sympathisers within the Portuguese army.[137] The complete isolation of the guerrillas in the Dembos greatly undermined their morale – leading to the defection of their Chief Political Officer (and former commander of the Kamy Column) Ingo in September 1972 – and as the months wore on a radical African nationalist faction started to emerge which would five years later mount a direct challenge to Neto's leadership of the MPLA (see Chapter 6).

Of more immediate concern to Neto, however – and what might have kept him from coming to Conakry – was the sudden collapse of the Eastern Front in early 1972.

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(BPA) with the USA on 26 May 1972 – in which both superpowers agreed to show restraint in Third World liberation struggles.

[134] Henda was killed in an attack on the Karipande barracks (Moxico) on 14 April 1968. His death was followed five months' later by the loss of Dr Américo de Barros de Assis Boavida (known as 'Ngola Kimbanda') who was killed when the MPLA's Hanoi II guerrilla camp was destroyed in a Portuguese helicopter attack (Anatolii Mikhailovich Khazanov, Cynthia Carlile (trans.), Agostinho Neto, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986, p.195).

[135] In early 1970, in response to criticism that the MPLA leadership was poorly co-ordinated and too slow to react to the changing guerrilla situation, the MPLA established the Comité Coordenador Político-Militar (Politico-Military Coordination Committee), a small executive committee of five members chaired by Neto himself (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution: (1962-1976), p.199). This new committee assumed authority over the MPLA's organisational structure in April of that year, but according to Van der Waals (op. cit., p.145) it soon divided into factions through a combination of poor communication, military setbacks and (from late 1972) leadership struggles.

[136] The column's name probably referred to an MPLA guerrilla who – like Ferraz Bomboko – had pretended to be a UPA supporter during the March 1961 uprising to save his own life. He was the first MPLA guerrilla to be sent from Angola to Léopoldville to beg for help against the impending Portuguese assault on Nambuangongo, making the fourteen-day trek with 70 young MPLA recruits disguised as UPA guerrillas (Khazanov, op. cit., pp.129-131).

[137] Author's interview with Paulo Jorge. So successful was the Portuguese cordon around the Dembos that by 1970 the MPLA had allegedly been reduced to only 300 poorly-armed guerrillas controlling a population of no more than 14,000 Angolans (Van der Waals, op. cit., p.152).

Rather unfortunately for the MPLA, their planned expansion in 1970 had coincided with the arrival of a new Commander-in-Chief for the Portuguese Armed Forces in Angola – General Costa Gomes[138] – and the offensive he launched in July of that year ('Operação Siroco') broke the MPLA advance, inflicting heavy casualties on the guerrillas and capturing large quantities of their supplies and ammunition.[139] A second Portuguese offensive during the dry season of 1971 succeeded in encircling the 'Eastern Front' – much as the Portuguese army had encircled the Dembos a decade earlier – and following a brief MPLA counter-attack in July which succeeded in capturing the Karipande barracks, the 'Eastern Front' started to collapse under Costa Gomes's third offensive – 'Operation Attila' – which was launched with South African assistance in February 1972.[140] Thus by the time the MPLA's representatives in Conakry met with Castro in May of that year the military situation looked bleak, and already the first inklings of dissent were starting to surface in the MPLA leadership (see below). It is therefore strange – given the MPLA's desperate military position in Angola at the time – that they did not request additional Cuban military assistance, either in supplies or in training new recruits to replace the thousands lost in the fighting.[141] Despite the fact that it was the first high-level meeting between the MPLA and Cuban leadership in Africa since Guevara's summit with Neto seven years earlier, it appears to have been a rather low-key affair, suggesting that the MPLA's alliance with Cuba was not Neto's highest priority at the time.

Possibly Neto was unable to attend due to the fighting on the Eastern Front, but the fact that he did not make his next visit to Cuba until after Angolan independence[142] – when throughout this period he made numerous visits to Eastern Europe, South-East

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[138] Gen. Costa Gomes – like his counter-part in Guiné Gen. Spínola – was deeply affected by the war in Angola, and in April 1974 he would be one of the key conspirators who overthrew the Caetano government (see next chapter).

[139] Van Der Waals (op. cit., p.142) describes Chipenda's decision to extend the insurgency beyond the 3rd Military Region as a "strategic blunder, born of over-optimism [and one which] was to prove fatal".

[140] The Portuguese were reputed to have made wide use of napalm and defoliants in the 1972 offensive in a form of warfare almost identical to their American contemporaries in Vietnam.

[141] In October 1972 the Portuguese High Command estimated that 2,000 MPLA guerrillas had been killed during the previous two years, including 43% of the leadership, reducing MPLA strength to 50% of its 1970 levels when Chipenda's disastrous 'Phase 2' had been launched (Van der Waals, op. cit., p.154). It is possible that the MPLA requested extra military aid from the Cubans in May 1972, but I have been unable to trace any record of such a request.

[142] Neto's first visit to Cuba was in the summer of 1966 when he negotiated the new training mission in the Escambray (see above). He did not then visit Cuba again until July 1976.

Asia and the Soviet Union in search of support – is a fairly strong indication of the weakness of the MPLA-Cuban alliance at this time.[143] After all, the MPLA was arguably in a worse military predicament than when Neto first met Che Guevara in 1965, its leadership so desperate that they had even agreed – at the request of the OAU – to start merger talks with Holden Roberto's FNLA (something they had been resisting for years) only a few weeks after the meeting with Castro in Conakry.[144] Possibly the MPLA thought there was no point in asking Cuba for help as all Cuban personnel were expressly forbidden by the Zambian government from operating in Zambia, and there was little Cuban instructors could do from Conakry to the help the crumbling Eastern Front. Or perhaps they were simply too embarrassed to reveal the true extent of the military collapse after the large amount of assistance they received from Cuba during the Brazzaville operation, and did not wish to jeopardise any further assistance Cuba might give them in the future.[145] Either way, there was a clear lack of communication between the MPLA and Cubans at this time, and when set against the close Cuban-PAIGC relationship which flourished in the early 1970s, it is clear that MPLA-Cuban relations in this period were perhaps more superficial than either side would wish to admit.[146]

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[143] For example, in early July 1974 Neto made a personal visit to Brazzaville to convince President Ngouabi to re-start weapons deliveries (see below). This was at a critical time for the MPLA which was attempting to expel the FNLA from Luanda, but he made the trip anyway, so dire was the need for arms. Thus, it seems strange that in a similarly desperate military situation he was not able to fly to Conakry to see Fidel Castro in person, suggesting a weak relationship between the two at the time.

[144] These talks began on 31 May 1972 in Brazzaville and culminated on 13 December 1972 with the formation of the Conselho Supremo para a Libertação de Angola (Supreme Council for the Liberation of Angola), with Holden Roberto as president and Neto as vice-president. However, the CLSA collapsed almost as soon as it was formed and was quickly forgotten, exactly like the previous FNLA-MPLA agreement signed six years before.

[145] It is also possible that the MPLA wished to keep the merger talks with the FNLA secret, possibly fearing that they would lose all Soviet bloc support if news got out that they were considering a merger with their anti-communist arch-enemy, the FNLA.

[146] During the meeting, Castro and the MPLA representatives may have discussed the recent FNLA mutiny (17 March 1972) at the Kinkuzu (Zaire) base-camp which nearly succeeded in overthrowing Roberto. According to Roberto the mutiny was entirely planned and led by MPLA agents who had infiltrated the FNLA over the previous two years. The mutiny involved a dozen or so officers who had all previously received training in India together under a Goan called João Cabral (who Roberto claims was an MPLA agent) and appears to have been spearheaded by a mysterious Angolan called Matumono. He claimed to have previously been a member of the MPLA, having undergone security training in the Isle of Youth (Cuba) before his expulsion on ethnic grounds (he was Bakongo). Invited to the camp to discuss the officers' grievances in March 1972, Roberto quickly realised it was a trap and narrowly escaped with his life, the remaining FNLA officers loyal to him (among them Commanders Tolya, Usauba, and Ngusso) immediately being arrested and shot by the mutineers. General disorder quickly broke out among the 7,000-8,000 guerrillas in the camp who went on a rampage, raping and pillaging in the local villages. Eventually Roberto called on his long-time ally

## The brewing factional dispute between Neto and Chipenda, 1970-73

Fidel Castro did, however, reconfirm his unequivocal support for Agostinho Neto and his leadership of the MPLA, a gesture which was to have a significant effect on Neto's chances of surviving the damaging factional splits which were surfacing at the time. Castro's support for Neto was, however, curiously at odds with his Soviet patron. In contrast to the Cubans, the Soviet Union had had a troubled relationship with the MPLA and had even resorted to suspending all military aid in October 1963 when the OAU had refused to recognise the organisation – only to restore it again the following July. In particular the Soviets disliked Neto and his style of leadership which has often been described as cold and hermetic, and they were perhaps uneasy at his willingness to seek aid from all sources, including arch-enemies of the Soviet Union such as China.[147] Although the Soviets decided to boost military aid to Neto in July 1970 – offering the MPLA substantial military hardware, logistical support & political training by military advisers – their interest in the MPLA was more in backing the man who stood the best chance of seizing power in Angola than in protecting Neto's hegemony within the guerrilla movement. When the Eastern Front started to collapse in mid-1972, therefore, Neto started to look to the Soviets less and less like that man, and with factionalism starting to split the MPLA leadership down the middle they would subtly switch their allegiance to the MPLA's most flamboyant and outspoken Ovimbundu member, Daniel Chipenda.

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Mobutu who gave him 1,500-2,000 elite Zairian paratroopers to retake the camp and restore order, and this was done easily and with little bloodshed. Following the mutiny, nine FNLA officers were tried and executed, the other mutineers (numbering up to 40) having fled across the Congo river to Brazzaville. According to Roberto, Matumono shouted out "Viva o MPLA!" just before the firing squad opened fire (author's interview with Holden Roberto, Luanda, 27 May 1998). If Roberto's allegations are true and Matumono really was an MPLA agent trained in Cuba, then the attempted coup was to prove a serious miscalculation by the MPLA, forcing Roberto into a radical reorganisation of the FNLA which by early 1974 had put it in a considerably stronger military position, just as the MPLA was disintegrating as a military and political force.

[147] Soviet suspicions of Neto's loyalties were fuelled by his trip to North Vietnam, North Korea and China (where he met with Chou En-Lai) in July 1971. Apparently Neto was unable to convince the Chinese leadership that the MPLA was wholly independent of Moscow, but the MPLA did start to receive some Chinese military aid following Neto's trip (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution, (1962-76), p.230). This aid continued until early 1974 when it was stopped altogether following the Chinese decision to concentrate their aid on the FNLA.

Chipenda's star had risen dramatically following the successful launch of the 3rd Military Region (or 'Eastern Front') in May 1966. Credited with having single-handedly ended the stalemate with the Portuguese and expanded the MPLA's influence across a vast section of eastern Angola, Chipenda increasingly looked on the Eastern Front as his own personal fiefdom – and on himself as the real strength behind the MPLA. When the Eastern Front then started to collapse in 1972 – following Chipenda's ill-advised escalation of the war into central Angola – there were immediate recriminations between Chipenda and the MPLA leadership in Lusaka, each blaming the other for the military disaster. It was a problem which was to surface five years later with the Nito Alves coup, and was a result of the genuine isolation of the guerrillas in each of the Military Regions, the lack of contact with the MPLA leadership in Lusaka and the appalling conditions on the front creating independent factions within the guerrilla leadership, many of whom started to view the Lusaka leadership as shirkers. Calling on forces directly loyal to him on the Eastern Front (which totalled around 1,500 men), in 1973 Chipenda decided to make a bid for the leadership of the MPLA, and it is highly-likely that he drew on quiet Soviet support for his endeavour. What form that support took is unclear, but what it is without doubt is that as Neto's grip on the party leadership started to falter in late 1972 the Soviets actively cultivated their relationship with Chipenda, believing he would eventually take over the leadership of the guerrilla movement.

When Chipenda did finally break away from the MPLA in early 1973, however – forming the 'Revolta do Leste' ('Eastern Revolt') faction named after the guerrilla front from which he drew his support – the Soviets stopped short of giving him their full backing. Instead that January they invited Neto to Moscow where they informed him that the Chipenda faction was planning to assassinate him,[148] a possible fabrication by the Soviets but one which nonetheless showed they were keeping their options open in Angola, a ploy which they were to repeat in the lead-up the Nito

[148] In response to the Soviet tip-off, on Neto's return to Zambia his supporters planned an armed attack on Chipenda and his close associates in Lusaka which was only foiled at the last minute by Zambian security forces (African Contemporary Record, 1975-76, Colin Legum (ed.), Rex Collings, London, 1976, p.A5).

Alves coup attempt four years later (see Chapter 6).[149] In the final analysis, however, the Soviets' doubts about Neto had less to do with his leadership of the MPLA and more to do with whether the guerrilla movement he led would eventually seize power in Angola – and by late 1973 this seemed a very remote possibility indeed. In particular a number of high-profile defections by leading MPLA cadres had seriously broken the guerrilla movement's morale,[150] and with increasingly acrimonious factional splits crippling the MPLA (as they would for most of the 1970s), the Soviet Union and the OAU suspended their military aid altogether.[151] Castro's support for Neto during this period was thus crucial, but the fact that Neto made no effort to capitalise on it (for example, by asking to expand the Cuban military aid programme to make up for the loss of Soviet military aid) would suggest that at this stage Cuban support was purely verbal, and that Cuban priorities lay elsewhere.

## Cuba and the MPLA drift apart in the lead-up to the Carnation Revolution (1972-74)

The primary reason for this was the 'Institutionalisation' process which from early 1972 onwards began to consume Cuba, and with Havana's focus shifting to internal political experiments (for example, in Matanzas) it appears that the Cuban government took its eye off the Angolan situation, little realising the imminence of the Lisbon coup which would radically change the outlook in Angola. Possibly the Cubans were pressured by the Soviet Union to keep their contacts with Neto's MPLA to a minimum, but it is far more likely that Cuba was too focused on its own political restructuring (which was at its most intense between 1972 and 1976) to pay full

[149] Despite withdrawing their support for Chipenda after he openly criticised Neto for his close links with the Soviet Union and declared that he would be seeking closer ties with China, the Soviet Embassy in Lusaka continued to hold secret conversations with Chipenda up until February 1974 (Westad, op. cit.). The last recorded 'confidential conversation' took place on 7 February 1974. The possibility that China may have had something to do with Chipenda's split from the MPLA so as to undermine the Soviets' principal client in Angola cannot be ruled out, although no direct evidence for this has yet appeared.

[150] In September 1972 the former commander of the 'Kamy Column' and political commissar of the 1st Military Region, Major Ingo, defected to the Portuguese, complaining that the MPLA leadership was Communist and corrupt (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), op. cit., p.198, n143). His defection was followed in April 1973 by the surrender of MPLA squadron commander 'Angola Livre' (aka Muti) to Portuguese forces. During detailed interrogations he revealed the depth of divisions in the MPLA and their total military rout (Van der Waals, op. cit., p.156).

[151] Van der Waals, op. cit., p.157.

attention to the MPLA's disintegration. Throughout the period leading up to the Carnation Revolution, therefore, Cuba did little more than go through the paces of its relationship with the MPLA, training small groups of cadres in Cuba, maintaining low-level diplomatic contacts through the Cuban embassies in Africa, and even occasionally publishing favourable propaganda about alleged MPLA military successes.[152] But when factional fighting broke out in the MPLA in early 1973, the Cuban government chose not get involved, viewing it as an overwhelmingly internal matter which would only be resolved in the various tumultuous meetings called over the following year in Lusaka, Brazzaville and on the Eastern Front. It would not be until December 1974 that the first high-level meeting occurred between Cuba and the MPLA, signalling Cuba's reengagement in the Angolan struggle (see next chapter).

Following Castro's brief meeting with the MPLA in May 1972, therefore, the Cuban-MPLA alliance gradually withered away as both parties concentrated on their own internal affairs. Ironically Cuba stepped up its internationalist operations in Africa following Castro's tour – setting up a training mission in Sierra Leone (which was in many ways similar to the Brazzaville operation) and smaller technical missions in Equatorial Guinea, Somalia, Algeria and Tanzania[153] – and then in October 1973 Havana dispatched a 750-man force to aid Syria in the Yom Kippur War.[154] But the MPLA was not part of this new phase of Cuban internationalism in Africa, and following the low-key meeting in Conakry the MPLA slowly disintegrated as a fighting and political force, the military defeat on the Eastern Front unleashing resentments (and egos) which had lain dormant since the early 1960s. To Neto's

[152] From around 1970 the Cuban propaganda machine started propagating inflated claims about the MPLA's military successes, at one stage claiming (quite outrageously) that Neto's MPLA controlled nearly 60% of Angolan territory (Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.96). The true figure was more like 10%, for although the Eastern Front covered nearly 20% of Angolan territory, the MPLA was actually in control of less than half of it.

[153] In September 1972 a 500-man Cuban military mission arrived in Sierra Leone to train the militia, and was placed under the command of Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez (who would later rise to notoriety following the Cuban withdrawal from Angola in 1989). In early 1973 several hundred Cuban military instructors started training Dhofari guerrillas in South Yemen, and this was expanded to 600-700 during the Dhofari rebellion which lasted until 1975. By November 1974 there were also 400 Cubans in Equatorial Guinea, 80 of them military advisors (Duncan, op. cit., p.125, Ratliff, op. cit., p.147 & LeoGrande, op. cit., p.12).

[154] As had happened exactly ten years previously during Cuba's military intervention in Algeria (see Chapter 1), the Cuban force arrived after the fighting had finished and saw no action, staying instead to

horror the movement he had struggled for over a decade to build into a respectable military and political force gradually fell apart before his eyes, and he was forced to leave Angola at critical moments in the desperate search for new sources of military aid (among them Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia) while the MPLA's insurgency against the Portuguese was reduced to little more than nuisance value.[155] When in early 1974 a third Brazzaville-based MPLA faction led by the Andrade brothers began to emerge – the 'Revolta Activa' faction – the demise of the MPLA as a viable liberation movement seemed inevitable, but before this next bout of factionalism could get underway a sudden turn of events in Lisbon dramatically changed the course of war, catching all three independence movements (and their backers) off-guard.

In a coup which took the entire world completely by surprise, on 25 April 1974 a group of young Portuguese army officers under the command of Major Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho overthrew Marcello Caetano's dictatorship, promising an end to the costly colonial wars in Africa and the immediate decolonisation of Portugal's African colonies. Faced with the very last thing they had prepared for – namely the rapid independence of Angola – the liberation movements were nonplussed, and they immediately scrambled to obtain foreign military support for the power struggle which would inevitably develop in the run-up to independence. With the Portuguese military presence in Angola shortly to be removed, there would now be almost unlimited possibilities for foreign interference in Angola, unleashing bitter enmities which had been brewing between the Angolan liberation movements over the previous two decades. The Carnation Revolution in Portugal thus marked a turning-point in the Angolan War, and would open Angola up to massive foreign intervention, providing Cuba with the opportunity to launch a military intervention on a scale previously unimagined by the Havana regime.

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train Syrian forces in the Golan Heights (Andrés Oppenheimer, Castro's Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba, Touchstone, New York, 1992, p.71).

[155] Van der Waals (op. cit., p.140) puts the MPLA's failure down to "the efficient Portuguese security action, geographical limitations and leadership conflicts".

# Chapter 3

## The Carnation Revolution and the failure of Angolan decolonisation April 1974-October 1975

The period running from the April 1974 coup in Lisbon until Angolan independence in November 1975 was one of escalating violence and political turmoil throughout the crumbling Portuguese Empire, and would by its end have plunged what had formerly been Portugal's most booming colony – Angola – into a devastating civil war, with no less than three major foreign armies fighting it out for supremacy. Portugal's sudden decision to decolonise its Empire after more than a decade of debilitating guerrilla wars was to unleash one of the bitterest and most dramatic military escalations in African history, with the result that by Independence Day (11 November 1975) more than thirty countries would have become directly involved in the Angolan War, supplying military equipment, military instructors, money, or all three to the various Angolan liberation movements.[1] The military escalation in Angola would, however, be a tortured and remarkably convoluted process, each intervening country improvising its strategy in reaction to its opponents' moves – both real and imagined – until the conflict had spiralled out of any one party's control, spawning the civil war in Angola which has continued to this day.[2] Throughout the chaotic decolonisation process Cuba and the Soviet Union – which by 1974 had reduced or cut off their support to the MPLA –gradually re-engaged in Angola, recognising the opportunity presented by a weak American presidency to expand their influence into sub-Saharan Africa. But with Angola's nearest neighbours – in particular Zaire and South Africa – also determined to manipulate events in Angola to their advantage, the stage was set for a dramatic military confrontation in Angola, culminating in the full-scale

[1] At least 34 countries had a significant involvement in the Angola War, supplying either military instructors, weaponry, military equipment, or all three. The MPLA received aid from the Soviet Union, Cuba, Yugoslavia, Algeria, Vietnam, North Korea, the PALOPs, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea-Conakry, East Germany; the FNLA received aid from the CIA, Zaire, China, Romania, Tunisia, Tanzania, France, Britain (mercenaries), Belgium, Zambia, India; and UNITA received aid from South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, the Arabian states, Morocco, Senegal, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Togo. Most of the FNLA's backers also gave aid to UNITA, and some (such as Romania, Guinea, Tanzania and Zambia) switched sides on at least one occasion.

[2] At the time of writing (March 2001), UNITA is still operating in the remoter parts of Angola while its leader Jonas Savimbi – now internationally reviled and devoid of most of his former allies – continues to avoid capture, his whereabouts remaining unknown.

interventions by Zaire, South Africa and Cuba in the run-up to independence (see next chapter).

**Outline of principal events during the decolonisation of Angola, April 1974-November 1975**

Given the number of protagonists involved in Angola's disastrous decolonisation – and the many inter-linking and often disputed events which occurred during this period – a brief outline of the principal events from April 1974 to November 1975 is included below, and is intended primarily as a rough guide to refer back to when reading the main text. Although periodic divisions in history are by their nature quite arbitrary, one can reasonably distinguish five specific phases in Angola's decolonisation:

1) **25 April 1974 – 30 September 1974: 'The Spinolista'**

Young, reformist officers from the Movimento das Forças Armadas (MFA) overthrow Caetano dictatorship. Guiné veteran General Spínola is appointed President of Portugal, seeking to reform Portuguese government and Empire but opposing unconditional independence for Portugal's colonies. Angolan independence movements (and their backers) are taken completely by surprise and look to Portugal for guidance. In July Spínola is forced by MFA officers to promise independence to all Portuguese colonies, appointing MPLA-sympathiser Admiral Rosa Coutinho head of the Council to oversee Angolan independence (29 July). China initiates FNLA military aid/training programme, CIA starts funding FNLA in small amounts. MPLA is consumed by factional splits. UNITA signs cease-fire with Portuguese. Cuba and the Soviet Union show only limited interest in Angola. Spínola's attempts to side-step independence lead to his overthrow on 30 September by radical MFA officers in favour of rapid decolonisation.

## 2) October 1974 – January 1975: Moves towards Alvor

MFA takes over Portuguese government, immediately pushing forward decolonisation of Portuguese Empire. Cease-fires are called with the FNLA and MPLA. The Soviet Union resumes military aid to MPLA (but still on a small scale), and is followed by Cuba in late December, the last principal player to become involved in Angola. Other Portuguese colonies given self-government or independence. Various waves of violence break out in Angola (starting on 10 November 1974). The FNLA, the MPLA & UNITA sign pact in Mombassa (5 January 1975) to heal differences, leading to full independence talks with the Portuguese government in Alvor (10-15 January 1975). Under the Alvor Accords all parties agree to the formation of a Transitional Government including MPLA, FNLA & UNITA ministers. 11 November 1975 is set as Independence Day.

## 3) 25 January 1975 – 23 March 1975: Transitional Government tries to take hold

Following the Alvor Accords, the Transitional Government is set up in Luanda on 31 January, but fails to take hold. Foreign powers ignore Alvor Accords and greatly increase military aid to all three guerrilla movements. Failed right-wing counter-coup in Portugal led by General Spínola (11 March 1975) further destabilises Portugal, inaugurating the 'Verão Quente' ('Hot Summer'), the Portuguese Revolution's most radical and chaotic phase. Growing bias towards MPLA in Portuguese leadership (led by Rosa Coutinho).

## 4) 23 March 1975 – 14 August 1975: Violence succeeds in toppling Transitional Government

Five waves of fighting break out in Angola – 23-28 March, 28 April-12 May, 28 May-end June, 9-16 July, 22 July-14 August – each one more severe than

the last. By 14 August Angola has been divided into spheres of influence and FNLA has been expelled from Luanda. Zairian troops join FNLA force in Angola (March). Soviet military aid to MPLA massively increased, altering nature of the conflict. Cubans finally persuaded to reengage in Angola, sending investigative mission to Luanda under Comandante Raúl Diaz Argüelles (3-8 August). Cubans propose sending 480-man force of Cuban instructors to train future FAPLA army. South Africans occupy Calueque hydroelectric installations with small force (8 August). Transitional Government collapses (14 August). Start of open warfare between MPLA and FNLA/UNITA.

5) **August 1975 – November 1975: Massive foreign intervention in countdown to independence**

Portugal annuls Alvor Accords (29 August) but nevertheless insists on withdrawing as planned by 11 November 1975. Foreign intervention massively stepped up: Cuban instructors start to arrive to train/fight with MPLA in late August, opening four training camps (CIR's) in mid-October. South Africa sends instructors to UNITA & FNLA (September), then after clash with FAPLA-Cuban column at Catengue (5 October) launches Operation Savannah, an invasion of southern Angola in support of FNLA/UNITA, rapidly advancing north *(see next chapter). More Zairian troops join FNLA* forces in northern Angola. More than 100,000 white Portuguese settlers flee Angola, leaving a power vacuum in their wake. As Benguela is about to fall to South African forces, on 5 November Cuba launches Operation Carlota, sending the first of an eventual 36,000 Cuban troops to Angola. Portugal withdraws on 10 November, leaving Angola in total chaos. Start of 'Second Liberation War' (see Chapter 5).

## Phase 1: The Lisbon coup (25 April 1975)

The military coup which overthrew Portugal's forty-year-old dictatorship and installed General Spínola as president was the culmination of years of military and civilian discontent in Portugal.[3] The long, arduous and often frustrating colonial wars in Angola, Guiné and Mozambique had taken a severe toll on the Portuguese population in general, and by April 1974 the Portuguese army had – in Commodore Leonel Cardoso's own words – "reached the limits of physical and psychological exhaustion". By 1973 fielding nearly 150,000 troops in all three war zones (proportionally five times the American commitment in Vietnam),[4] the Portuguese armed forces had been stretched to the limit of their capabilities, and the mounting Portuguese casualties (over 35,000 by 1974) had begun to undermine morale.[5] Domestic opposition to the colonial wars had also been growing since the late 1960s, and by early 1974 was affecting conscription for national service, more than half of those called up in the last draft before April 1974 refusing to report for duty.[6] But with civilian dissent smothered by fierce censorship within Portugal itself (enforced by the PIDE, or secret police), the catalyst for change would have to come from within the army itself, and in particular from a new generation of liberal middle-ranking officers who had served in the colonial wars and were opposed to their continuation. These officers' desire for radical change soon found figureheads in Generals Costa Gomes and Spínola, who were both highly-successful veterans of the colonial wars in Angola and Guiné respectively, and who were almost unique in the

[3] My account of the lead-up to the Carnation Revolution is taken from Van der Waals (op. cit., p.244) & an unpublished talk given by Professor Fernando Rosas entitled 'Failed Transition: Portugal from Caetano's Spring to the Revolution of 25 April 1974' given at the University of Bristol on 2 November 1999.

[4] In 1973 the Portuguese forces saw the heaviest fighting of the war in Angola, Mozambique and Guiné, fielding 149,090 troops (Estado-Maior do Exército, Resenha Histórico-Militar das Campanhas de África (1961-1974), Commissão para o Estudo das Campanhas de África, Lisbon, 1988, p.240).

[5] The Portuguese Army's General Staff puts the official number of Portuguese casualties in the military campaigns in Africa from 1961 to 1974 at 8,290 killed & 26,223 wounded (i.e. 34,513 casualties) (Estado-Maior do Exército, op. cit., p.246). This number, however, does not appear to include those missing in action or – more significantly – any casualty figures for African troops attached to the Portuguese army who also saw action. A more inclusive estimate puts the total number of casualties on the Portuguese side at 11,000 killed & 30,000 wounded or physically-disabled by the war (Van der Waals, op. cit., p.244).

[6] Van der Waals, op. cit., p.244. Additionally, the total cost of all three African wars had become crippling, by 1974 totalling 120 billion escudos, roughly US$5 billion (African Contemporary Record, 1974-1975, op. cit., p.A73).

Portuguese army's High Command for their public opposition to the continuation of the African wars, a stance which soon brought them into conflict with Caetano.

The incident which laid the foundations for this confrontation dated back to 1972 when Caetano rejected Spínola's requests for a cease-fire and negotiations with the PAIGC, declaring rather disturbingly that a military defeat in Guiné better served Portugal's interests than a political capitulation.[7] Haunted by memories of the Indian invasion of Goa in December 1961 – when the surrounded 4,000-man Portuguese garrison had been ordered by Salazar to fight to the last man (an order their commander disobeyed) – many of the more reformist Portuguese officers were greatly disturbed when news of Caetano's exchange with Spínola leaked out, and following his return to Portugal in August 1973 Spínola immediately began writing up his experiences into what would become his political manifesto: Portugal e O Futuro ('Portugal and the Future'). That same month the Movimento das Forças Armadas (MFA) was secretly formed by a group of 140 young, middle-ranking officers who had been greatly politicised in the radical atmosphere of Portuguese universities in the early 1970s, and who were committed to ending the African wars. The MFA rapidly expanded its grip over the Portuguese armed forces, and following the sensational publication of Spínola's book on 23 February 1974 Caetano was goaded into action, calling 120 senior officers to the presidential residence to demonstrate their support for the government, and then dismissing Generals Costa Gomes and Spínola (both leading figures in the MFA) when they refused to attend. Taken off-guard, several loyal MFA officers launched a bungled coup manqué two days later which Caetano easily suppressed, but by then the pressure for change was simply too great, and less than a month later the MFA launched a second coup which succeeded in bringing Caetano's dictatorship to an end.

[7] "Armies are meant to fight and fight to win", Caetano wrote to Spínola, "but it is not might which wins. If the Portuguese Army in Guinea is beaten after it has fought to its utmost, the defeat would enable us to take the necessary legal and political steps to proceed with the defence of our other overseas territories" (quoted in Van der Waals, op. cit., p.239).

## Reaction of the Superpowers to the Carnation Revolution

It is hard to overstate the extent to which the Carnation Revolution took the world by surprise, from the global Superpowers to the Angolan liberation movements themselves. Initially written-off as a conventional military coup of the sort which first brought the Portuguese military to power in 1926, within days of the Lisbon coup it was clear that a major social revolution was underway which would sweep away the previous political system in its entirety. The American government – itself in deep crisis with the Watergate scandal reaching its climax (President Nixon was eventually forced to resign on 9 August 1974) – was nonplussed by the news which overnight invalidated its entire strategy for Southern Africa. Five years previously Nixon had ordered the National Security Council (NSC) to prepare a comprehensive review of American policy towards Southern Africa, producing the infamous 'National Security Study Memorandum No. 39' (NSSM#39) on 15 August 1969.[8] Concluding that Southern Africa was 'not vital' to American strategic interests and that the Portuguese could not be defeated by insurgent forces there (whilst conversely acknowledging that Portugal could not definitively crush the insurgency), the USA had decided to strengthen its alliance with Portugal which it increasingly viewed as a stalwart ally in the struggle against Communism. Accordingly, as the focus of the Cold War shifted to South-East Asia, the USA cut what little aid it was giving to the FNLA, closed down the CIA office in Lisbon and appointed as US Ambassador to Portugal a long-term friend of Nixon's on a retirement posting.[9] Thus when the April 1974 coup

[8] NSSM#39 was also referred to as the 'Tar Baby' option by the CIA, although what this term actually meant is unclear. A review of American policy in Africa was long overdue, however, given the USA's general complacency towards Africa in the late 1960s. Remarkably, the American Ambassador to Conakry from October 1966 until August 1969 – Robinson McIlvaine – was fully aware of Cuba's significant military presence both in Conakry and inside Guiné itself, yet was not overtly concerned about it, believing that a handful of Cubans would be insufficient to change the course of the war (he was probably wrong). Former State Department official Paul O' Neil later explained: "In the 1960s there was no sense of a Cuban danger in Africa; [therefore] their intervention in Angola [in 1975] was a real surprise" (quoted in Westad, op. cit.).

[9] The strengthening of the alliance with Portugal was also influenced by the USA's need to renegotiate the lease on the American base in the Azores. Later to prove vital in transporting vitally-needed military supplies to Israel during the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), the American base in the Azores was finally secured by a generous deal signed with the Portuguese government on 9 December 1971, granting Portugal $35 million in aid and up to $400 million in credit. The success of the American airlift in October 1973 led to a personal visit to Portugal by Kissinger in December 1973 to further extend the lease. It is alleged that in return for the continued American use of the Azores,

struck the American government was taken completely off-guard, and Washington could initially do little more than wait and see what steps the new Portuguese government took next.

The Soviets – like their American counterparts – were also taken by surprise by events in Lisbon, having disbelieved all warnings of an imminent coup from sources in Portugal (for example, from the leader of the Portuguese Socialist Party, Mário Soares).[10] The timing of the April coup could not have been worse for the Soviets, as only a few months before they had suspended all military aid to the MPLA, and this left them poorly-positioned in the run-up to negotiations on the future make-up of an independent Angolan government. Even more alarming for the Soviet Union, however, was the news that China had decided to initiate a massive military aid programme for the FNLA, a decision taken following Holden Roberto's visit there in December 1973.[11] Still viewed as the Soviet Union's bitterest rival in international affairs, the arrival of between 50 and 100 Chinese military instructors[12] to train the FNLA in the weeks immediately following the coup in Lisbon threatened to tip the military balance massively in the FNLA's favour and – more importantly – afford China a controlling influence in a part of the world which the Soviets had only recently recognised as being strategically important.[13] Almost immediately the

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Kissinger privately agreed to give secret American military aid to Portugal for use in its African wars (in violation of UN sanctions) (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), pp.235-236).

[10] Rosas, op. cit..

[11] Roberto first made contact with the Chinese when he was introduced to Marshal Chen Yi at Kenya's independence celebrations in December 1963, but Chen Yi's invitation for Roberto to visit China was overruled by Mobutu who was seeking to align himself closer with the West at the time. However, following Nixon's meeting with Mao Zedong in February 1972 and the USA's rapprochement with China, Mobutu had a change in heart and visited China in January 1973, opening the way for Roberto's fourteen-man FNLA delegation the following December. During the visit Roberto met with Chou Enlai (Mao Zedong was seriously ill at the time) and visited the extensive underground arms and food depots which had been constructed under Mao's orders, agreeing before he left to a significant Chinese military aid programme (author's interview with Roberto).

[12] Roberto claims that China sent only 52 military instructors to train the FNLA in bases in Zaire, and that these started to arrive in March 1974, before the Carnation Revolution itself (author's interview with Roberto). However, Stockwell (op. cit., p.67) states that there were 112 military instructors in total, and that they didn't arrive until 29 May 1974. Other writers date their arrival between late 1973 (Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.21) and June 1974 (LeoGrande in Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.22 & Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.245).

[13] In a report dated 26 November 1970 the KGB noted that following the Nixon administration's renewed alliance with Portugal, both Guiné and Angola had gained great strategic importance for the Soviet Union (Westad, op. cit.). This may have influenced the decision by the Soviet Navy to establish a permanent fleet off West Africa in September 1971 (Henriksen, op. cit., p.8).

Soviets saw the need to review their moribund relationship with the MPLA (which they had let wane), and they may have been encouraged in their decision by the Cuban government which had stood steadfastly by Neto throughout his leadership crisis (see below).

**Reaction of the Angolan liberation movements to the Carnation Revolution**

Of all the parties directly affected by the fall of Caetano's government, however, those least prepared for the radical changes which lay ahead were the Angolan independence movements themselves. Unlike their counterparts in Guiné and Mozambique which had successfully eliminated factional splits to form a united front against the Portuguese (forming the PAIGC and FRELIMO respectively), the Angolan movements had resisted all attempts to merge, and after thirteen years of *fighting against the Portuguese (and each other)* they were more bitterly divided than ever. Attempts to merge the FNLA with the MPLA in 1966 and again in 1972 had both failed,[14] as did further efforts in the months preceding the Alvor talks,[15] and the permanent division between these two liberation movements proved ripe for exploitation by foreign powers, opening up Angola to massive foreign intervention in its internal affairs. With the benefit of hindsight it seems incredible that no one foresaw the overthrow of Caetano's regime, given the total breakdown in communication between the army and government, the weariness of the Portuguese people and – ironically – the permeation of progressive ideas into the Portuguese armed forces from their very enemies, the PAIGC. But it appears that by early 1974 the Angolan independence movements had become so deeply locked into their

[14] On 13 October 1966 the MPLA and FNLA signed an accord under OAU auspices calling for a cease-fire, an end to hostile propaganda, the release of prisoners, and future cooperation between the two movements, but the accord was soon repudiated by Roberto and abandoned in its entirety. Following the OAU's decision in June 1971 to withdraw its recognition of the GRAE, in June 1972 talks were convened in Brazzaville by Presidents Mobutu and Ngouabi which led to the formation of the CSLA in December of that year (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.209). As noted above, however, the CSLA was short-lived and was soon totally forgotten.

[15] On 28 July 1974 Neto, Roberto & Savimbi signed an agreement at Bukavu (Zaire, on the border with Rwanda) under the auspices of the OAU, pledging to unite to form a common front in the up-coming independence negotiations with Portugal. However, the agreement quickly fell apart following massive rioting in Luanda (most of it white-instigated) from 5 to 8 August 1974, which left 37 Africans dead and led to the exodus from Luanda of between 50,000 and 70,000 Africans the following month (Africa Contemporary Record, 1974-75, op. cit., p.B542).

cyclical struggle with the Portuguese forces (and each other) that they failed to grasp the significance of events in Portugal until the dramatic coup came in April. Caught off-guard by the news (Neto was in Canada on a fund-raising trip at the time), the liberation movements scrambled to muster their forces in what quickly developed into a struggle for ascendancy in Angola.

Of the three liberation movements, the FNLA found itself quite by chance in the strongest military position in April 1974. Shortly about to receive substantial Chinese and Romanian military aid – and significantly strengthened by a radical political and military restructuring – the FNLA was confidently planning to expand its control over the whole of northern Angola, although whether it would have been able to mount a successful offensive in 1974 is debatable.[16] UNITA was at the time a minor military force in Angola and by 1974 had still not extended its influence beyond its power base in the Ovimbundu homelands of Huambo and Bié. Since launching its guerrilla insurgency in December 1966, the movement had contented itself with sporadic disruptions of the Benguela railway-line and periodic incursions into MPLA-held territory in Moxico, but it had signally failed to make an impact nationally. Its reputation was also greatly tarnished by the publication in July 1974 of letters (allegedly written two years before) which detailed extensive UNITA-Portuguese military collusion against the MPLA.[17] Though never conclusively proven, it is clear that from around September 1972 some form of collaboration started with the Portuguese counter-insurgency forces, each side agreeing not to attack the other and

[16] Holden Roberto clearly feels he was cheated of victory by the Lisbon coup, insisting that by April 1974 the FNLA was in control of a large part of northern Angola, having surrounded Uíge and invaded Cuanza Norte. "We were starting to win. Because [the Portuguese] were trying to destroy us but they couldn't, and they had decided to give up" (author's interview with Holden Roberto). Subsequent appraisal of the FNLA's military forces by CIA operative John Stockwell a year later casts considerable doubt on Roberto's appraisal, however. Inspecting Roberto's forces in Ambriz Stockwell counted only "25 soldiers, plus a few dozen uniformed hangers-on" with "more rifles and mortars than soldiers" at the time that Roberto was claiming to have 1,500 men there (Stockwell, op. cit., p.125). Stockwell later called the FNLA forces a "[b]adly armed, disorganized, kind of rabble" and described Roberto as "a cocktail party cowboy. He'd spent his whole career politicking in Kinshasa. He knew nothing of military operations or logistics or organization" (interview with Stockwell in Episode 17 ['Good Guys, Bad Guys'] of 'Cold War' by CNN. Full text of interviews available at http://cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/).

[17] These letters were published in the pro-MPLA journal Afrique-Asie (#61) on 8 July 1974 (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.429, n62).

concentrate instead on destroying the MPLA.[18] Militarily insignificant outside its core regions, UNITA was in no position to take on either the FNLA or the MPLA, and unsurprisingly it was the keenest supporter of efforts to find a negotiated independence settlement.

And finally the MPLA, as discussed above, was in a state of near military collapse, and was struggling to hold itself together under Neto's faltering leadership. Fragile party unity took another hammer blow less than a fortnight after the Lisbon coup when on 11 May 1974 Mário and Joaquim Pinto de Andrade announced the formation of a second MPLA faction – the 'Revolta Activa' ('Active Revolt') MPLA. Backed by seventeen other MPLA militants – who accused Neto of excessive 'presidentialism' in his leadership of the movement – the appearance of a further MPLA faction so soon after Chipenda's 'Eastern Revolt' had torn party loyalties down the middle threatened the complete disintegration of the MPLA as a political entity. Indeed, so dire had Neto's position become by early 1974 that less than a month before the Portuguese coup the Soviet Ambassador to Brazzaville (E.I. Afanasenko) informed Moscow that the MPLA had ceased to function as a movement – and that in his opinion Neto had little hope of reuniting it again.[19] Having lost all OAU and Soviet military aid in December 1973, the MPLA had cast its net as wide as possible in the search for new backers, but with poor results, putting it at an increasing disadvantage to its main rival the FNLA.[20] Conscious of the need to strengthen the MPLA's national profile in the run-up to what many believed would be rapid decolonisation, Neto therefore spent most of the period immediately following the Lisbon coup attempting to heal the splits in the MPLA, but the re-incorporation of

[18] William Minter later carried out a detailed study of the allegations, published under the title Operation Timber: Pages from the Savimbi Dossier (Africa World Press, New Jersey, 1988). The fact that the Portuguese army jokingly referred to UNITA as 'Portugal's 5th battalion' due to its endless clashes with the MPLA would tend to support the allegations (Van der Waals, op. cit., p.174).

[19] The letter was dated 30 March 1974 (Westad, op. cit.). On a brighter note, Afanasenko did note the existence of a number of "progressively oriented activists" in the MPLA who wanted closer relations with the Soviet Union. This may have been the first oblique reference to Nito Alves and José Van Dúnem, both of whom went on to launch a coup against Neto in May 1977, allegedly with Soviet complicity (see Chapter 6).

[20] In March 1974 Neto travelled to Bucharest in an attempt to persuade President Ceausescu to abandon the deal signed with Roberto in January of that year to aid the FNLA militarily, and switch his support to the MPLA, but he failed to make any impression on the Romanians (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.428, n43).

both the Chipenda and Andrade brothers factions back into the party was to prove beyond his (and everyone else's) capabilities.

## Cuban reaction to the Carnation Revolution

The Cuban government's reaction to the news that radical progressive officers had seized power in Lisbon was uncharacteristically muted. The reason for this appears to be that by early 1974 the Cuban government was focused exclusively on the final stages of Cuba's 'Institutionalisation' process – which included the 'Poder Popular' pilot scheme in Matanzas and the drafting of a new Cuban Constitution[21] – and was further distracted by high-profile visits from several of Cuba's most important foreign allies (among them Leonid Brezhnev, Erik Honecker and Houari Boumedienne).[22] Although welcoming the change in the Portuguese government and its moves towards granting independence to Portugal's colonies, Cuba – like many of the foreign powers subsequently involved in Angola – does not initially appear to have realised the significance of the changes being proposed by the new Portuguese government, and made no moves to revive its moribund alliance with the MPLA. Instead the Cuban government concentrated on internal matters and ironically – considering the size of the Cuban operation in Angola over the next sixteen years – was the last significant foreign power to intervene militarily in Angola, holding off until late December 1974 before renewing high-level contacts with the MPLA leadership, scarcely a fortnight before the Alvor negotiations began (see below).

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[21] The Poder Popular scheme was based on the Soviet political model, and following its successful piloting in Matanzas between April and July 1974, the same model was applied across the whole country in the run-up to the National Assembly elections. Concurrently a Consitutional Commission was set up in Havana on 23 October 1974 under the chairmanship of Castro's trusted ally Blas Roca, and was charged with drafting a new Cuban Constitution. The new draft Constitution was approved by the PCC Politburo on 10 April 1975, and became law following a referendum held on 15 February 1976. The massive vote in favour (roughly 98%) enabled the Constitution's enactment less than a fortnight later on 24 February (not unintentionally the anniversary of the start of the 1895 Independence War against Spain) (Carina Pino-Santos Navarro (ed.), Cronología: 25 años de Revolución, Editora Política, Havana, 1987).

[22] Leonid Brezhnev became the first Soviet premier to visit Cuba when he arrived in Havana on 28 January 1974 for a week-long visit. On 5 February (two days after Brezhnev left Cuba) Raúl Castro paid a return visit to the Soviet Union, also visiting Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia & Bulgaria before returning to Cuba on 1 April. Erik Honecker visited Cuba from 20 to 26 February, and Houari

Thus when news of the Lisbon coup reached the world in April 1974, all the principal parties involved for good or worse in the decolonisation of Angola – and in particular the Angolan independence movements themselves – were caught completely by surprise, and initially they could do little more than look towards Lisbon to see how the situation developed. It is thus no coincidence that the principal events of the Portuguese Revolution coincided almost exactly with those of Angola's decolonisation, as the gradual radicalisation of the Portuguese government fed into the uncertainty and instability in Angola, until by mid-1975 Portugal completely lost control of the decolonisation process, plunging Angola into chaotic fighting.[23] Tragically for Angola, the new Portuguese regime was quite simply overwhelmed by the enormousness of the task facing it, an outcome which in retrospect is entirely understandable. For not only was the new Portuguese government under acute pressure to simultaneously decolonise five African colonies as quickly as possible, but at the same time it was expected to reform Portugal's entire governmental and economic system after forty years of stultifying dictatorship. And perhaps most crucially of all, it would have to do this without any reliable military or police forces under its command, a near impossible task in the radical climate of the Carnation Revolution.[24] Thus – quite literally overnight – a power vacuum was created in all of Portugal's colonies which other foreign powers were quick to recognise and act upon.

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Boumedienne spent five days there from 12 to 17 April – both before the Carnation Revolution occurred (all dates taken from Cronología: 25 años de Revolución, op. cit.).

[23] The Portuguese (or Carnation) Revolution started on 25 April 1974, almost immediately initiating moves towards Angolan independence. Its revolutionary nature is generally accepted as finishing with the counter-coup of 25 November 1975, exactly two weeks after Angola became independent (and ironically the same day the Cuban Military Mission in Angola became operational).

[24] Under Caetano, the Portuguese State had counted on some 3,000 PIDE officers and c.80,000 members of the Portuguese Legion and other State militia to support it. However, following the April coup the PIDE was disbanded and many of its prominent officers arrested (by late 1974 around 1,050 ex-PIDE/DGS officers were under arrest and awaiting trial in Lisbon), leading to a complete security vacuum in Portugal (Africa Contemporary Record, 1974-75, Colin Legum (ed.), Africana Publishing Company, New York, 1975, pp.A70 & A73). In addition, the coup placed the army under the exclusive control of progressive MFA officers, the majority of whom were opposed to any continuation of the African wars and refused all orders to escalate it further. Once the MFA took complete control of the government in October 1974, a paramilitary force was formed under Saraiva de Carvalho (the General who spearheaded the Lisbon coup) called COPCON (Comando Opressionado do Continente), but this eventually evolved into the armed wing of the Communists and had to be put down with some force during the final coup which ended the Revolution in late November 1975.

## Intervention by Superpowers begins (mid-1974 onwards)

Sensing that the divisions already existing between the independence movements could be played to their advantage, within a few months of the Lisbon coup the Superpowers and many of the local regional powers began to increase (or renew) their contacts with the movements they had been supporting since the 1960s, thus ensuring the permanence of these divisions. Few if any of those countries, however, fully appreciated the consequences that their intervention would have on the Angolan conflict. The ostensible aim of increasing aid to their preferred candidates was to strengthen them in comparison to their rivals, increase their profile in Angola and place them in the best possible position in the upcoming independence negotiations. What the intervening countries failed to appreciate, however, was that by increasing military and financial aid to the Angolan guerrilla movements, they were initiating an escalation of the conflict in Angola which would eventually spin out of everyone's control.[25] Had the Portuguese government been able to seize the initiative early on and call tripartite independence negotiations for Angola including China, the USA and the Soviet Union – before they began massive arms shipments to their Angolan proxies – the Portuguese could arguably have produced a more robust power-sharing agreement which stood a half decent chance of being implemented. But as all efforts to bring the Angolan movements together throughout 1974 consistently met with failure,[26] so these movements turned towards violent means to achieve their aims, and increasingly they called on their powerful patrons to provide them with the arms and equipment to do so.

Ironically China – which of the global Superpowers had had the least involvement in the Angolan War up to this point – was the first to escalate its involvement in the conflict in Angola, pledging in late 1973 to provide substantial military training and arms to the FNLA guerrillas based in Zaire. What the Chinese could not have realised at the time, however, was that within four months the Caetano regime would be

[25] Westad (op. cit.) notes that the Soviet Union "did not expect a full scale civil war to break out before Angola achieved its independence in November", a view clearly shared by its American and Chinese rivals.

[26] By mid-1974 there were no less than six major parties involved in the decolonisation process: the MPLA, the FNLA, UNITA, the 'Eastern Revolt' MPLA, the 'Active Revolt' MPLA and FLEC.

overthrown, putting them in a dominating position in Angola which they had neither anticipated nor – if they were honest about it – desired. Possibly in response to this, on 7 July 1974 the CIA (without the authorisation of the 40 Committee)[27] started funding Roberto, although on such a small scale that he was unable to buy arms and instead used the money to purchase Luanda's leading daily newspaper – A Província de Angola – and one of its television stations.[28] And then one month later South Africa, which had been operating closely with the Portuguese colonial forces against the MPLA and SWAPO in Angola since 1968, initiated contacts with Chipenda's breakaway 'Eastern Revolt' faction, although at this stage Pretoria appears to have had no plans to invade Angola.[29] Thus, before the Alvor Accords were signed, American and South African aid to the FNLA was almost insignificant compared to China's – a situation which would be diametrically reversed over the following months as China pulled out of Angola and the USA and South Africa massively stepped up their assistance to the FNLA (see below).

In the face of such global competition, it was inevitable that the Soviet Union would resume its interest in Angola, although it is unclear whether the Soviet resumption of military aid to Neto's MPLA preceded or followed the Americans and South Africans. The official Soviet version maintains that only after other powers had begun to intervene significantly in Angola was the Soviet Union persuaded to resume military aid to the MPLA around October 1974.[30] However, recent evidence from Soviet government archives reveals that as early as May 1974 they were convinced

[27] The 40 Committee has been described as a "crisis-management committee of the senior policymakers [in the American government] charged with overseeing covert operations" (LeoGrande, op. cit., p.16). This committee would later oversee the *disastrous Operation IAFeature* in Angola (see below).

[28] Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.B424. Although some writers (for example, Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.22) maintain that the CIA also started arming the FNLA at this time via the Zairian army, it would appear that no military aid was given to the FNLA until Operation IAFeature was drawn up a year later (see below). If any American arms were going to the FNLA from Zaire in July 1974, then it is most likely they were from Mobutu himself who is reputed to have been Roberto's kinsman through Roberto's marriage to his sister-in-law, an allegation Roberto vehemently denies (author's interview with Roberto).

[29] Contact between the SADF and 'Eastern Revolt' was made by Col. Jan Breytenbach who flew in to the Chipenda faction's M'pupa base (Cuando Cubango) in early August 1974, unsure whether the guerrillas still held the area. Breytenbach described Chipenda's faction as "a fairly slick gangster mob which preyed on banks, businesses and quite often the unfortunate white Portuguese settlers" (Jan Breytenbach, Forged in Battle, Saayman & Weber, Capetown, SA, 1986, p.4).

[30] Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.21.

that the entire Portuguese Empire was on the verge of collapse, and that their interests would best be served by strengthening the MPLA under Neto's leadership.[31] Stockwell notes that the Soviets began flying large quantities of military supplies to Dar-es-Salaam for unspecified liberation movements in August 1974, the same month that the CPSU publicly announced its support for the MPLA as the only true representative of the Angolan people.[32] Thus it would appear that Soviet military aid to the MPLA resumed some time between August and October 1974 (albeit on a small scale), most probably in response to China's large FNLA military aid programme and Neto's re-election as President of the MPLA (see below).[33] The problem for Neto, however, was that the details of the Soviet military aid programme would not be finalised until after the Alvor Accords (January 1975), and in the meantime the few arms the Soviets had shipped to the MPLA were stuck in Dar-es-Salaam, the MPLA having no means to transport them to Angola. With the FNLA growing increasingly aggressive in Luanda – and with the MPLA's best 250 cadres not due to complete their training in the Soviet Union until mid-1975 – Neto was forced to look elsewhere for military support, initiating a search which would eventually bring him back into contact with the Cubans (see below).

**Phase 2: Radical MFA government speeds up decolonisation of Angola, leading to Alvor Accords (October 1974-January 1975)**

The decision to resume Soviet military aid to the MPLA in October/November 1974 followed (and may have been influenced by) the dramatic removal of President Spínola on 30 September 1974, and his replacement by a radical MFA-dominated government. Spínola had disappointed the more radical members of the MFA once it became clear that he was seeking to reform rather than dismantle the Portuguese Empire, proposing the sort of reforms which could arguably have worked when

[31] Westad, op. cit.. Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.26) also cites Boris Rabbot who claims that in April 1974 the Soviet Politburo was divided on what policy to adopt towards Angola, Alexander Shelepin advocating sending Soviet 'volunteers' to Angola whereas Brezhnev preferred the less risky option of using Cuban troops. Shelepin was removed from the Politburo in late 1975, allegedly as a result of this disagreement. No corroboration for this story, however, has appeared elsewhere.
[32] Stockwell, op. cit., p.67.

Caetano became Prime Minister in September 1968.[34] But Caetano had roundly missed the opportunity for reform, and by 1974 Spínola was swimming against the tide. Following his botched attempt to side-step full Angolan independence by calling his preferred candidates – Roberto and Chipenda – to Cape Verde for talks on creating a coalition government,[35] Spínola was replaced by General Costa Gomes who immediately declared the MFA's intention to move forward immediately with the decolonisation of the Portuguese Empire. Cease-fires were quickly called with the FNLA (12 October) and MPLA (21 October) – UNITA had suspended all military operations back in June – and a concerted effort was made to heal the rift between the three movements so that a tripartite agreement could be signed as quickly as possible. The appointment in November of the MPLA's most outspoken supporter – Rear-Admiral Antônio Alba Rosa Coutinho (also known as 'The Red Admiral' for his Communist leanings) – as Acting High Commissioner in Angola signalled the Lisbon regime's open sympathy for the MPLA, and was to play a vital role over the following months in putting the MPLA in power.[36]

**Neto regains control of the MPLA, September 1974**

By this stage Agostinho Neto had finally reasserted his control over the MPLA and expelled (at least for the time-being) its more outspoken factions. Ironically the Carnation Revolution actually saved Neto and the MPLA, for although it caught the guerrilla movement at its weakest, the promise of imminent independence forced the leadership to resolve its factional disputes once and for all – or quite simply face total

[33] Marcum (The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), pp.252-253) dates the decision later, in early November 1974, the same month that 250 MPLA cadres were sent to the Soviet Union for specialist military training.

[34] Spínola envisioned setting up a 'Lusitanian Federation' including Portugal, its colonies and Brazil in a loose political and economic structure. The idea was totally impracticable, however, given Brazil's emergence as a Latin American power and the overwhelming expectation of independence in all of Portugal's colonies following the Lisbon coup.

[35] On 14 September 1974, Spínola called Roberto, Chipenda and Mobutu to Sal (Cape Verde) for talks, refusing to invite either Neto or Savimbi. In the end Roberto refused to attend, having allegedly heard from sources in Lisbon that Spínola's days in power were numbered. Instead he sent his Foreign Minister Johnny Eduardo Pinnock, Enrique (currently FNLA Minister of Information) & Paulo Tuga, and following Spínola's fall two weeks later the deal brokered at Sal was forgotten (author's interview with Roberto).

[36] Rosa Coutinho's influence over the decolonisation of Angola had been felt as early as 29 July 1974 when the MFA appointed him Chief of the Military Council to oversee Angolan independence.

annihilation. Meetings to heal the rift in the MPLA involving all three factions in June and July 1974 only intensified factionalism in the movement, and culminated the following month in Lusaka with the MPLA's first Party Conference for twelve years. With the voting split exactly between Neto and Chipenda (who each received 165 votes, 'Active Revolt' mustering the remaining 70 votes out of the 400 MPLA delegates present), bitter wrangling ensued for the next eleven days until Neto and the 'Active Revolt' faction walked out.[37] Having announced the formation of the new MPLA army – the FAPLA (Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola) – on 1 August,[38] Neto's supporters withdrew to the Eastern Front where from 12 to 21 September they held their own Inter-Regional Conference of MPLA Militants, attended by 250 Neto supporters. On 21 September the Conference ended with Neto's re-election as President of the newly-reformed Neto-MPLA (for want of a better term), a move which seems to have finally convinced the Soviets of Neto's legitimacy as leader and which led to their immediate resumption of military aid. A little over a week later Spínola was removed from office, and almost immediately the MPLA sent a trusted cohort – Paulo Jorge – to Lisbon to begin three months of secret independence negotiations with the Portuguese.[39]

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[37] In the ensuing confusion the Rump of the Congress elected Chipenda President of the MPLA – a predictable outcome given that the Rump was almost exclusively made up of 'Eastern Revolt' activists. This decision stood only until 3 September 1974 when all three factions again signed a pact to reunify the MPLA, with Neto as President and Chipenda and Joaquim Pinto de Andrade as Vice-Presidents. Like all pacts before and since, however, it was short-lived and was quickly abandoned by all the parties who signed it.

[38] Paulo Jorge maintains that Neto's faction decided to break definitively with the two 'Revolta' factions on 31 July 1974, and that the foundation of the FAPLA the following day was the signal for cadres loyal to Neto to withdraw to Moxico for the special Inter-Regional Conference. This version of events doesn't fit all other accounts which date Neto's final walk-out on 23 August, and seems illogical considering the (short-lived) agreement all three MPLA factions signed in Brazzaville on 3 September following the conference. Perhaps Paulo Jorge has confused his dates slightly (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[39] Author's interview with Paulo Jorge: "At the end of September I was called to Lusaka from this Conference and they told me that I had been designated to go to Portugal to start conversations with the MFA. I asked to go with someone so we could alternate, but they just wanted me to go on my own... So at the end of September I arrived in Portugal and I made contact with the Portuguese leaders. Of course between September and December my contacts, my presence in Portugal and my conversations with Portuguese leaders were secret, because the MPLA leadership didn't want others to know that we were in negotiations there with the Portuguese government... So from September through to December we had discussions".

## Fighting breaks out between FNLA, MPLA & UNITA, November 1974

Meanwhile, rivalry between the independence movements – in particular between the FNLA and the MPLA – had erupted into open warfare, inaugurating a cycle of violent conflict which was to continue with brief pauses up to and beyond Angolan independence. The focus of conflict between the three movements in the lead-up to independence was Luanda, Angola's political and economic capital, and traditionally an area with strong MPLA sympathies. Following cease-fires with the Portuguese, in October 1974 the MPLA's main rivals – the FNLA, UNITA, and the 'Eastern Revolt' & 'Active Revolt' factions – set up offices in Luanda, immediately heightening tensions in the Angolan capital. As these groups increased their military presence and attempted to expand their influence over the local population, the bitter rivalry between them finally erupted in armed clashes on 10 November 1974, leaving nearly 50 dead.[40] From this date onwards there was fighting almost daily between the MPLA, the FNLA and (unwillingly) UNITA in Luanda and increasingly across the whole of Angola, growing in intensity after the Alvor Accords were signed in January 1975. Very quickly Angola began to fracture into spheres of influence, and by mid-1975 the FNLA would effectively be in control of northern Angola (Roberto had begun infiltrating FNLA units into this region from Zaire in July 1974), UNITA would have retrenched in its traditional Ovimbundu heartlands of Huambo and Bié, while the MPLA clung mostly to the coast-line, as well as controlling parts of Moxico and (from early November 1974) Cabinda.[41]

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[40] Luanda had already experienced riots in early November 1974 – when white Angolans went on the rampage in the Cazenga suburb, indiscriminately killing Africans there (10 were killed on the night of 3 November) – and tensions increased with the high-profile arrival of Lúcio Lara on 6 November to an ecstatic crowd of up to 50,000 MPLA supporters. Finally, on 10 November, 20,000-30,000 Africans gathered at Luanda airport either to welcome or to protest at the arrival of a UNITA delegation, and in the charged atmosphere heavy fighting broke out which over the following two days killed 48 people and wounded 104 (Africa Contemporary Record, 1974-75, op. cit., p.B534). It is also alleged by the MPLA that on 15 November 1974 the FNLA attempted to seize power in Luanda only to be thwarted by MPLA militants and the Portuguese authorities, but there is no evidence to support this.

[41] On 2 November 1974 the MPLA (with the support of Rosa Coutinho and several junior Portuguese officers) used the excuse of rioting between MPLA and FLEC activists in Cabinda city to occupy the city by force. Led by guerrilla veteran (and later Minister of Defence) Pedro Maria Tonha ('Pedalé'), hundreds of FAPLA guerrillas from the 2nd Military Region backed by the Portuguese garrison at Belize (north-east Cabinda) seized Cabinda city – forcing the FLEC militants to flee north – and removed the Portuguese Governor Brig.-Gen. Temudo Barata who had been openly sympathetic to FLEC's cause. Under the command of French mercenary Jean Kay and ex-FNLA militant Alexandre Taty (who had attempted to oust Roberto as head of the FNLA on 20 June 1965), the FLEC force

## The Alvor Accords, 15 January 1975

In this highly-charged atmosphere the OAU and various African states tried their best to bring the movements together for talks aimed at healing the rift between them and stopping the internecine fighting in Angola. Eventually, on 5 January 1975 Neto's MPLA, the FNLA and UNITA[42] were coaxed together in Mombassa where they signed a trilateral accord pledging to cooperate peacefully, safeguard Angolan territorial integrity and form a common front in the independence negotiations with Portugal.[43] This agreement laid the foundations for trilateral independence talks with the Portuguese government at Alvor (in the Algarve) which lasted from 10 to 15 January 1975. In retrospect, the Alvor talks were clearly the last chance Angola had for a relatively peaceful and orderly decolonisation, and despite an undeniable bias towards the MPLA the Portuguese government appears to have been genuine in its desire to see an independence agreement which included all the major Angolan movements.[44] The deal which was finally signed by Neto, Roberto and Savimbi on 15 January 1975 remains to this day the only legal accord signed by all three parties and Portugal, providing for the immediate establishment of a Transitional Government whose posts would be evenly divided between the three movements and Portugal, the integration of all three movements' military forces into a new national

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seized Massabi (near the Congo-Brazzaville border) on 10 November, holding out there until 16 November when Portuguese troops under the command of the new governor Colonel Lopes Alves drove them out of Cabinda for good (Africa Contemporary Record, 1974-75, op. cit., p.B536 & Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), pp.148 & 254).

[42] FLEC and the 'Eastern Revolt' & 'Active Revolt' factions were excluded from the talks, leaving Chipenda little alternative but to officially join one of the three recognised independence movements if his faction was to stand any chance of grabbing a share of the power in Angola after independence. He eventually merged militarily with the FNLA on 16 February 1975.

[43] A similar agreement had been signed by the FNLA, MPLA and UNITA at Bukavu (Zaire) under the auspices of four African presidents (Kaunda, Mobutu, Ngouabi & Nyerere) on 28 July 1974. However, this had been abandoned as tensions and violence escalated in late 1974, and it was only the first-time offer of independence talks by the Portuguese government that cajoled the guerrilla movements into signing the power-sharing agreement at Mombassa.

[44] The issue of UNITA's involvement in the talks was a contentious one as both the FNLA and the MPLA refused to consider the movement as an equal, citing its overwhelmingly tribal base and almost exclusive support in the Ovimbundu homelands as proof that it was not a national movement. Paulo Jorge brought up the issue in his initial talks with the new Portuguese government in September 1974, but at the insistence of Mário Soares (who Paulo Jorge claims was unaware that UNITA had never been recognised by the OAU) UNITA was included as one of the parties in the Trilateral independence talks which followed (author's interview with Paulo Jorge). Roberto claims that UNITA was only included at his insistence, so as to balance the negotiations between the MPLA and MFA on one side and the FNLA and UNITA on the other (author's interview with Holden Roberto).

army, and the drafting of a provisional Constitution to be followed by full national elections before the end of October 1975.[45] Independence day was set for 11 November 1975, coincidentally the 400th Anniversary of the founding of the capital, São Paulo de Luanda.[46]

## Cuba briefly reengages in Angola, December 1974

It was at this stage – around the time of the Alvor Accords – that Cuba reengaged in Angola, although the debate still rages over exactly when Cuban military aid to the MPLA re-started. According to recent research carried out by Gleijeses at the PCC Archives, Cuban contact with the MPLA continued throughout 1974 as it had before the Carnation Revolution, the Cubans training several guerrilla cadres in Cuba whilst maintaining contacts with Neto through the various Cuban embassies in Africa. It was not until 31 December 1974 that the first high-level meeting occurred between MPLA officials and two Cuban officers in Dar-es-Salaam, during which a possible increase in Cuban military aid to the movement was discussed (see below).[47] This version of events, however, is contradicted by several Cuban veterans who claim to have been fighting in Angola much earlier, in one case even before the Carnation Revolution itself.[48] The latter claim – by a Cuban who allegedly served as a FAR

[45] The Transitional Government would be headed by a Prime Ministerial Council of three members, one from each movement. Each movement also had three seats in Council of Ministers, with a Lisbon-appointed High Commissioner to arbitrate differences between the coalition. Decisions made by the Transitional Government would require a 2/3 majority. The new national army would be formed by integrating 8,000 troops from each movement with 24,000 Portuguese troops to form a mixed military force, all under the supervision of a ten-member National Defence Commission headed by the High Commissioner with representatives from the MPLA, FNLA, UNITA, the Portuguese army, navy and air force. Once the national army was formed, the Portuguese troops would gradually be withdrawn between 1 October 1975 and 29 February 1976. The Transitional Government was charged with the task of drafting a provisional constitution, drawing up an electoral law, and registering voters and candidates for general elections to the Constituent Assembly (Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.47).

[46] It would also ironically be the tenth anniversary of UDI, when Ian Smith's white supremacist regime in Southern Rhodesia unilaterally (and illegally) declared independence from Great Britain, inaugurating fifteen years of oppressive white rule and severe civil strife – hardly a heartening precedent for the Angolans.

[47] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

[48] One ex-FAR paratrooper living in Havana claims his uncle's unit, numbering around 20 men but without heavy equipment, was sent to central Angola in the summer of 1974 to train and fight alongside the MPLA (interview with author, Havana, September 1999). The wife of another FAR veteran – a photographer now living in Miami – claims her husband was first sent to Cabinda as a military photographer in February 1974 (interview with author, Havana, November 1997). The veracity of both stories – although corroborated by friends and colleagues – is impossible to prove.

photographer in Cabinda in February 1974 – coincides with other veterans' claims that a number of Cuban instructors continued to serve in the MPLA's 2nd Military Region and in Brazzaville throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, despite the Cuban government's insistence that they had all been withdrawn in July 1967.[49] Given that by 1974 President Ngouabi's government was receiving extensive Chinese and Soviet military aid – some of which was handed on to the MPLA fighting in Cabinda – the likelihood that there was a Cuban military presence in Brazzaville throughout the 1970s does not seem implausible.[50] But whether this military personnel did actually serve with the MPLA in Cabinda at the time – or in Angola itself – is more doubtful, and until more solid evidence comes to light there seems to be no definitive answer to this question.[51]

Regardless of whether or not Cuban military instructors were operating with MPLA in Angola or Congo-Brazzaville, Neto's meeting with the senior Cuban officers in December 1974 was nevertheless highly significant, signalling Cuba's renewed commitment to the MPLA and to Neto's leadership of the liberation movement. It is not recorded who requested the meeting, but it was most likely Neto himself who by now was desperately worried about the MPLA's military chances of survival in Angola's rapidly escalating conflict. For despite the resumption of Soviet military aid in October 1974, it had only been on a modest scale and – crucially – the bulk of the arms were not expected to arrive in Angola until May 1975 at the earliest.[52] In the

[49] For example, one ex-FAR paratrooper alleged that Cuba maintained '*focos*' of Cuban military instructors with the MPLA throughout the 1960s and 1970s, based almost exclusively in Brazzaville. These Cubans were sent to form the nucleus of guerrilla units, to reinforce them or – on occasion – to act as observation units for larger units which would be infiltrated into the area at a later date (interview with author, Havana, September 1999). LeoGrande (op. cit., p.10) claims Cuban military instructors continued to fight on the Cabinda Front after the withdrawal of Cuban units from Brazzaville in July 1967, a claim the Cuban government still officially denies.

[50] On 14 September 1971 Ngouabi signed a treaty with China which pledged to supply and train his army and to set up an extensive military aid and trade programme (Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.58). Three years later he agreed to an elaborate Soviet plan to supply the MPLA with heavy weapons and large amounts of ammunition, using Brazzaville as the point of transit (Westad, op. cit.). A substantial Cuban military involvement in both programmes – especially the latter – seems very likely, given that they were the Congolese government's only allies capable of handling the highly-sophisticated Soviet military equipment which started to appear in Africa in the 1970s.

[51] Paulo Jorge, who served as MPLA representative in Congo-Brazzaville from November 1969 to July 1971, visited the 2nd Military Region on several occasions during this period and insists that by that time there were no Cuban instructors left in Brazzaville (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[52] On 4 December 1974 the Soviets concluded negotiations with President Ngouabi to use Brazzaville as the principal point of transit in an elaborate plan to supply the MPLA with heavy weapons and

meantime the MPLA faced a growing military threat from the FNLA, just as crucial independence negotiations with the Portuguese were about to start in Alvor. The MPLA did have a stockpile of Soviet weapons in Dar-es-Salaam, but possessed neither the means with which to transport them to Luanda (where they were desperately needed in the daily street-fighting which had broken out in November 1974) nor the instructors to train new recruits in their use. Two separate MPLA delegations had been sent to Yugoslavia and Algeria – two of Neto's most stalwart allies over the years – to arrange urgent arms shipments to make up the shortfall, but even these could not be expected to arrive until March 1975.[53] It was thus in this tricky predicament – lacking both arms and military instructors – that Neto turned to his Cuban allies in late 1974.[54]

On 31 December 1974 an MPLA delegation chaired by Neto himself met two Cuban officials in Dar-es-Salaam – Carlos Cadelo (the PCC representative for Angola), and Major Alfonso Pérez Morales 'Pina' (who had served with great distinction with the PAIGC in Guiné). The two Cubans spoke at length with Neto and his colleagues,

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ammunition, all of which would be smuggled into Angola from there (Westad, op. cit). However, the details of this ambitious programme were not finalised until early 1975, and by Neto's estimate the arms would not start arriving in Angola for five months (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.). By the end of 1974 the MPLA had received only $6 million worth of arms and equipment from the Soviet Union which were shipped to Dar-es-Salaam and Pointe Noire/Brazzaville (Willem Steenkamp, South Africa's Border War, 1966-1989, Ashanti Publishing Ltd, Gibraltar, 1989, p.34), less than 2% of the total amount the Soviets would spend on their Angola programme in 1975/76.

[53] Paulo Jorge formed part of one of the delegations. The arms which eventually arrived from these two allies were used by MPLA forces in Luanda to expel the FNLA from the city in July 1975 (author's interview with Paulo Jorge).

[54] It is equally possible that Cuba requested the meeting, possibly at the suggestion of its Soviet patron. Although the Cuban government has vehemently denied that the Soviet Union played any part in its decision to reengage in Angola in late 1974, one cannot escape the suspicion that there was some form of coordination in their actions. At that stage Cuba was at the most critical phase of the 'Institutionalisation' process, and contact with the Soviets – both on a military and political level – was arguably at its closest in Cuban history. Although it is true that during 1974 Cuba developed closer links with the new Portuguese regime – resulting in the release of Captain Pedro Rodríguez Peralta (who had been captured in Guiné in 1969) from a Portuguese gaol on 15 September 1974 – it is unlikely that these had a significant effect on Cuba's decision to get involved in Angola again. What seems to be more suggestive of Cuban motivations is the manner in which their decision to reengage in Angola coincided almost exactly with the resumption of the Soviet military aid programme, strongly suggesting that the two decisions were linked in some way, perhaps fundamentally. Indeed the Cubans were to play a role in the Soviet military aid programme – providing military instructors and technical specialists to train the MPLA in the use of Soviet weaponry – which was so pivotal that it is hard to envision how the programme could have gone ahead without Cuban involvement. Given the exceptionally close Soviet-Cuban relationship at that time, it seems reasonable to assume that the

discussing the MPLA's most pressing needs and the military situation in Angola at the time, and requested Neto's permission to carry out a clandestine visit to Angola as soon as possible. Cadelo and Pina were essentially on a fact-finding mission for the Cuban government, and it appears that Havana wanted its own men to assess the situation on the ground in Angola before launching a new military aid programme – perhaps reflecting the secret doubts the FAR harboured about the MPLA's actual military strength. Probably in recognition of this (and as a demonstration of the trust he had in the Cubans) Neto readily granted the request, admonishing the Cubans to "verify everything he had told [them] so that [they] could get an objective view of the real situation in Angola".[55] Neto then left for Mombassa where on 5 January 1975 he signed a cooperation pact with the FNLA and UNITA, leading directly to the Alvor negotiations which were concluded ten days later. During this time the two Cubans visited the MPLA's main bases of support, meeting leading MPLA cadres in Lusaka and Luanda, among them N'Dalu (until recently Angolan ambassador to the Washington), Xietu (Chief of the FAPLA) and Lopo do Nascimento (a leading party ideologue).[56]

Greatly encouraged by what they had seen, Cadelo and Pina met again with Neto in Dar-es-Salaam in mid-January 1975, just after he returned from the signing ceremony in Alvor. They discussed various ways in which Cuba could aid the MPLA, constantly returning to the idea of sending Cuban military instructors to Angola to train the massive influx of new recruits which were gathering in the MPLA's core areas of support. However, no concrete proposals could be drawn up until Neto knew exactly what type of weapons the Soviets were going to send him (suggesting that at this late stage the Soviet military aid programme had still not been finalised), and this was unlikely for several months.[57] In the meantime, Neto gave the two Cubans a letter to be presented to the PCC Central Committee in which he outlined his most pressing needs, principal among them a request for $100,000 to cover the shipping

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Soviets encouraged the Cubans to re-establish contact with the MPLA, although what form this encouragement actually took may never be known.

[55] Quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

[56] See Jaime & Barber's interview with Jorge Risquet for details of their visit to Angola (op. cit., p.339).

[57] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

costs of the Soviet arms stockpiled in Dar-es-Salaam. Neto also asked for Cuban military instructors to establish training centres in Angola for the MPLA's new recruits, and large amounts of weaponry and uniforms to equip the troops who would form the new FAPLA.[58] Confident that the Cuban government would give his urgent requests their immediate attention, Neto sent the two Cubans on their way back to Cuba where they presented their lengthy report (42 pages in total) to the Cuban government in late January 1975.

However – rather puzzlingly – no action appears to have been taken by the Cuban government, despite the report's positive tone. Although acknowledging the FNLA's temporary military supremacy, Cadelo and Pina optimistically predicted that this would evaporate once Soviet arms started to arrive, and they concluded that the MPLA was "the best structured politically and militarily" and as a result enjoyed "extraordinary popular support".[59] But the Cuban government appears to have ignored Neto's letter – not even granting the relatively simple request for $100,000 – and no further aid was offered to the MPLA other than the specialist training of up to a dozen MPLA cadres in Cuba in March and April 1975, a move which was broadly in line with the long-term Cuban training programme which had been in operation since the late 1960s.[60] Cuban diplomats in Brazzaville, Lusaka and Dar-es-Salaam did go out of their way in this period to persuade their Soviet counterparts of the need to back Neto and the MPLA to the hilt,[61] but their action may well have been

[58] See Appendix 1 for full text of letter.
[59] Quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..
[60] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.. Jorge Risquet claims the MPLA cadres arrived in Cuba in February 1975 (see Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.339).
[61] Some senior Soviet diplomats had always favoured all-out support for the MPLA, principal among them the Soviet Ambassador to Brazzaville, E I Afanasenko. On 25 December 1974 he wrote to Moscow insisting that the MPLA was the most progressive Angolan movement and that it needed all the help it could get from progressive countries all over the world, the Soviet Union principal among them. His support for the MPLA remained firm throughout the Alvor talks, and on 10 January 1975 he told the Cuban Ambassador to Brazzaville Columbio Álvarez that the CPSU was watching the Angolan situation closely and supported the MPLA. Other Soviet ambassadors – such as the Ambassador to Dar-es-Salaam S. A. Slipchenko – required more persuasion, however. Accordingly, the day before Pina and Cadelo met with Neto, Oscar Oramas (a senior Cuban Foreign Ministry official) met with Slipchenko and informed him that Cuba would only accept Neto as head of the MPLA and would be stepping up its military commitment to his guerrilla movement immediately, urging the Soviets to do likewise. Six weeks later (on 10 February 1975) the Cuban Ambassador to Dar-es-Salaam, Ramón Ladur – returning from Luanda where he had accompanied Neto (at Neto's personal request) for his tumultuous arrival on 4 February – again urged Slipchenko to back the MPLA before it was too late (Westad, op. cit.). The visit by Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (Deputy Prime Minister for MINREX) to the

unilateral, for in Cuba the government was focused too exclusively on the upcoming National Assembly elections and the First Party Congress to pay full attention to the MPLA's predicament in Angola.[62] It is even feasible that the Cuban leadership viewed the two-man mission to Angola as nothing more than a gesture of good will, and that it did not reflect a genuine interest to increase their commitment to the MPLA. But whatever their reasoning may have been,[63] the contact lapsed and Neto was not to meet with the Cubans again until May 1975. By that stage the war would have escalated to alarming levels, and Neto's originally modest requests would have grown into more ambitious plans for a substantial Cuban military aid programme in Angola itself (see below).

**Phase 3: The failure of the Transitional Government (January-March 1975)**

The period running from January to March 1975 was dominated by Portugal's efforts to establish the Transitional Government in Angola, a fruitless endeavour which represented the metropolitan power's last attempt to impose a peaceful and orderly decolonisation on Angola – before washing its hands of the troubled colony for good. In retrospect, it seems clear that by the time the Portuguese government gathered the liberation movements together at Alvor (in January 1975) it was already too late for a negotiated settlement to resolve the conflict, Lisbon having repeatedly put off discussion of Angolan independence while the comparatively simple hand-over of government to the PAIGC (10 September 1974) and FRELIMO (on 20 September

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Soviet Union in January 1975 may also have involved discussions concerning Angola, and is highly significant considering the pivotal role Rodríguez often played in Cuban-Soviet relations.

[62] In the words of Jorge Risquet: "[1975] was a year of never-ending work. This may have played a role [in Cuba's apparent indifference to the MPLA's requests]. And the situation in Angola was quite confused. In the first months of 1975 there was very little discussion in the sessions of the Political Bureau about Angola. Our focus was on domestic matters" (quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.). The state visit of President Kaunda to Havana from 21 to 23 April 1975 – during which he was awarded Cuba's highest honour, the Orden Nacional 'José Martí' – also suggests that the Cuban government's African policy was out of step with the MPLA. For perhaps unknown to the Cubans, Kaunda had just flown in from Washington DC where (on 19 April) he had met with President Ford and Kissinger, urging them to prevent an MPLA victory in Angola (Viney, op. cit., p.21). That the Cuban government should have honoured one of the MPLA's principal opponents (and ally of the Americans) even as MPLA forces were struggling to hold on to Luanda is a clear indication of the extent to which the Cuban government was unaware of (or did not have time to deal with) events unfolding in Angola.

1974) was effected.[64] Thus by the time the Transitional government was set up in late January 1975 serious fighting had already broken out between the liberation movements in Luanda, and once this spread across the whole of Angola in mid-1975 the Transitional Government's days were numbered, and with them Angola's chance for a peaceful transition to independence. A long-shot in the best of circumstances, the Alvor Accords required the genuine backing of all the parties involved in Angola's decolonisation – which by January 1975 included China, the USA, the Soviet Union, and even Cuba – if they were to stand any chance of being implemented. But the opportunity to involve foreign parties was missed, and given their total exclusion from the negotiations (a mistake Chester Crocker's team would avoid during the complex Tripartite negotiations over a decade later), it is unsurprising that they viewed the Accords as nothing more than a smoke-screen for even greater intervention in Angola's internal affairs.

On 22 January 1975 (one week after the Alvor Accords were signed) the CIA's 40 Committee met to discuss the situation in Angola, authorising limited funding to Roberto's FNLA ($300,000) but at this stage rejecting requests to fund UNITA which it viewed as a localised phenomenon.[65] This small increase in American funding – coupled with the recent arrival of fresh Chinese and Romanian military aid[66] – put the FNLA in the strongest military position in Angola, and may have been the reason why no further increase in American aid was considered until late June 1975 when the FNLA began to lose ground to its main Angolan rival, the MPLA. One week later (on 30 January) the Soviets signalled they too were stepping up their military aid programme to the MPLA – the Soviet Ambassador to Brazzaville promising José

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[63] Gleijeses also suggests that Cuba may have been reluctant to be drawn into what could have become an open-ended conflict, and did not want to jeopardise its relations with the West which had begun to improve in the early 1970s ('Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.).

[64] Guinea-Bissau became independent under a PAIGC-dominated government on 10 September 1974, and ten days later a Transitional Government was set up in Mozambique, containing leading cadres of FRELIMO (although not including Samora Machel who remained outside Mozambique until independence the following June).

[65] The 40 Committee also decided to re-open the CIA station in Luanda as their intelligence on Angola was remarkably poor (and would continue to be so throughout Angola's decolonisation). This was done in March 1975 (Stockwell, op. cit., p.52).

[66] In June 1974, 450 tons of Chinese arms arrived in Kinshasa for the FNLA which was already being trained by Chinese military instructors. Then on 28 August 1974 the Kinshasa press reported the delivery of a large amount of military equipment for the FNLA from the Romanian Communist Party (Stockwell, op. cit., p.67).

Eduardo Dos Santos extensive "technical, military, and civilian assistance"[67] – and over the next three months Soviet aid grew in size and scope, although Neto's renewed request to the Cubans for $100,000 in May 1975 would suggest that even at this late stage it was still on a small scale. This would change in late March when the Soviet programme dramatically shifted up a gear, catapulting the FAPLA to military prominence in Angola and triggering the final phase in Angola's escalation to full-scale war (see below).

Rivalry between the movements – fuelled by fresh American and Soviet military aid – almost immediately shattered the hopes placed in the Transitional Government, and within 24 hours of its inauguration (on 31 January 1975) fighting broke out once more between the MPLA and FNLA in Luanda. Determined to achieve total control of the Angolan capital, the MPLA and FNLA first ganged up to annihilate the smaller rival groups, attacking Chipenda's 'Eastern Revolt' offices on 3 February and then destroying them completely ten days later, forcing Chipenda's military merger with the FNLA on 16 February.[68] With Chipenda's challenge effectively contained, the FNLA and MPLA then turned on each other, violence erupting on 23 March when FNLA militants attacked MPLA installations in the Luanda suburbs of Cazenga and Vila Alice, hurling hand-grenades through the office window as Lopo do Nascimento was in the middle of an official visit. MPLA activists responded in kind, and this first wave of violence was followed by tit-for-tat killings,[69] an increased FAPLA and FNLA military presence in Luanda, and the perpetual break-down of cease-fires brokered by the Portuguese authorities.[70] March 1975 also saw the first undisputed intervention of foreign troops in Angola, Mobutu sending 1,200 regular Zairian troops into northern Angola in support of the FNLA.[71] Their arrival greatly destabilised northern Angola, making a mockery of Portuguese sovereignty (and authority) in the

[67] Quoted in Westad, op. cit..
[68] Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.B424. The attacks left 20 killed and 30 wounded.
[69] The MPLA accused the FNLA of massacring 51 MPLA recruits who were on their way to a training camp in Caxito on 26 March 1975. UNITA later claimed that on 9 August 1975 FAPLA soldiers shot 150 UNITA recruits in a similar massacre.
[70] On 30 March 1975 the delicate cease-fire arranged two days before by Portuguese Foreign Minister Eduardo Augusto de Melo Antunes was shattered by the arrival of a motorised column of 500 FNLA troops in Luanda (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.258). Fighting broke out almost immediately and was only halted by another fragile cease-fire on 8 April (which also broke down quickly).

area, and presaged the direct intervention of far greater foreign forces in Angola over the following months.

## Phase 4: The Collapse of the Transitional Government and the annulment of the Alvor Accords (March-August 1975)

The principal cause of the collapse of Portuguese authority in Angola lay not in Luanda, however, but in Lisbon where on 11 March the ousted General Spínola launched a failed right-wing counter-coup. Alarmed at the Portuguese Revolution's lurch to the left – and feeling that Angola's decolonisation was proceeding too fast (Spínola had envisioned an independence day some time in late 1976) – Spínola was seeking to turn the clock back and end the Communists' growing influence in the Portuguese government. Ironically, however, the coup's failure had the opposite effect on the Portuguese Revolution, triggering the start of its most radical phase – the 'Verão Quente' ('Hot Summer'). Between March 1975 and the final coup of 25 November 1975 Portugal would lose control of the decolonisation process in Angola, and within weeks of Spínola's coup manqué started to look more like a spectator than a colonial power as Angola collapsed into civil war. For the Alvor Accords to have succeeded in Angola, a strong Portuguese military and security presence was essential to suppress the spreading violence and give the Transitional Government the authority it needed to make progress towards the proposed elections. But with Portuguese troops refusing to fight in Angola[72] – and with an increasingly pro-MPLA stance emerging in the Portuguese government (spearheaded by Rosa Coutinho) – that authority was fatally undermined, eventually bringing about its collapse. In particular the dismissal of High Commissioner António da Silva Cardoso on 1 August – whose attempts to restrain the MPLA's aggressive activities in Luanda had made him popular among the FNLA and UNITA leaderships[73] – convinced the MPLA's rivals

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[71] Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.23.

[72] On 8 June 1975, 76 Portuguese soldiers mutinied in Lisbon, refusing to board a reinforcement aircraft for Angola. This was one of several reported mutinies during this period.

[73] When the fourth wave of fighting broke out on 9 July 1975, High Commissioner Silva Cardoso accused the MPLA of making a concerted effort to drive its rivals out of Luanda and the surrounding region (an accusation which by 16 July had been proved correct). Eventually on 26 July Silva Cardoso launched a punitive operation against the MPLA, attacking its headquarters in Vila Alice with a company of Portuguese troops, killing 14 and wounding 22. This attack provoked Neto into

that the Transitional Government was biased against them, and that their interests would best be served on the battle-field.[74]

Having been expelled from Luanda on 16 July by the MPLA after a week's heavy fighting,[75] the FNLA withdrew to Ambriz where it announced on 20 July its intention to march on the Angolan capital and seize it before Independence Day. Its dramatic capture of Caxito (35 miles north-east of Luanda) four days later only served to underline the reality of that threat. The capture of Caxito sparked off the fifth and final wave of violence in Angola which continued up until the collapse of the Transitional Government on 14 August 1975. Accepting the pointlessness of continuing with a government most of whose ministers had been forced to flee the capital in early August,[76] the Portuguese High Commissioner dissolved the Transitional Government, officially taking over the functions of the Prime Ministerial Council. In practice, however, most of the vacant posts in the Angolan government were taken up by the MPLA, a clear indication of Portugal's sympathies for the movement.[77] When on 29 August the Portuguese government formally annulled the Alvor Accords, to everyone's surprise it offered nothing in their place, merely

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demanding the immediate withdrawal of all Portuguese forces from Angola, and given strong MPLA sympathies in the Portuguese government it was only a matter of time before this incident was used to dismiss Silva Cardoso. Rosa Coutinho may also have held a grudge against Silva Cardoso for having taken over his role as High Commissioner on 24 January 1975 as a result of the Alvor Accords, a move which reduced Rosa Coutinho's direct influence on the Angolan decolonisation process. General Ferreira do Macedo was appointed the new High Commissioner in Silva Cardoso's place (Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit.).

[74] Silva Cardoso's dismissal also coincided with the arrival of an investigative mission led by General Carlos Fabião and Rosa Coutinho, sent by the Portuguese government to determine which course of action they should take in the face of mounting violence in Angola. Rosa Coutinho's public declaration that Portugal should immediately recognise the MPLA as the legal government of Angola once independence had been granted seemed to confirm FNLA and UNITA suspicions that the Portuguese government was biased towards the MPLA. However, most Portuguese Army officers ignored Rosa Coutinho's advice and decided to leave their options open, waiting to see which side gained dominance before recognising their government (Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.55). Thus Portugal was among the last Western countries to recognise the People's Republic of Angola (PRA) on 22 February 1976.

[75] According to Paulo Jorge (in interview), the decision to expel the FNLA from Luanda was taken in response to its aggressive activities and the need to convince the Luanda population (who Jorge claims were predominantly MPLA supporters) that the MPLA had backbone and was prepared to fight it out with the FNLA. Once arms arrived from Yugoslavia and Algeria in March 1975, the MPLA was able to build up its forces in Luanda and expel the FNLA from the city in early July.

[76] Fierce fighting between MPLA and FNLA militants in the magisterial district of Luanda on 8 August 1975 led to the final withdrawal of all FNLA and UNITA ministers from Luanda, making the collapse of the Transitional Government six days later inevitable.

[77] Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.54.

insisting that independence would go ahead as planned on 11 November 1975. Unable to deal with the nascent civil war in Angola as Portugal was itself undergoing a social revolution, Portugal effectively washed its hands of Angola, yet another new High Commissioner (Commodore Leonel Cardoso) announcing within a fortnight of his inauguration that the final withdrawal of Portuguese troops had begun.[78] It was an open invitation for the three independence movements to unleash an all-out war for supremacy in Angola, and was the signal their foreign backers had been waiting for to escalate their intervention in Angola to a level beyond which it could no longer be contained or even controlled.

**Phase 5: Massive foreign intervention in Angola spirals out of control in the lead-up to Angolan independence (March-November 1975)**

The period following the collapse of the Transitional Government (14 August) to the granting of Angolan independence (10 November) was one of increasing chaos and violence in Angola, and witnessed the intervention of no less than three foreign armies, each backed by a major foreign power. By effectively throwing in the towel in Angola in late August 1975, the Portuguese government had also thrown down the gauntlet to the MPLA and FNLA, challenging both liberation movements to take control of as much of Angola as possible before the symbolic date of 11 November. Although there was still sporadic talk of a government of national unity (this was only ephemerally achieved in April 1997), each of the Angolan movements' powerful foreign backers – the USA, the Soviet Union, Zaire and South Africa – had no doubt as to which strategy they would adopt in the three months remaining before independence, and following the collapse of Portuguese authority in Angola a massive military escalation (which had started to manifest itself as far back as March 1975) was unleashed. What none of the intervening countries appear to have realised, however, was that by the end of the year their reactive military escalation would have

[78] Commodore Leonel Cardoso was appointed by the Lisbon government on 28 August 1975, the day before the Alvor Accords were officially annulled. He arrived in Luanda on 6 September, and made the announcement regarding the withdrawal of Portuguese troops on 18 September, reconfirming on 28 October that they would be all be gone by Independence Day. In the end, Leonel Cardoso was given the dubious honour of officially granting Angola independence at a ceremony in Luanda on 10 November, before boarding a Portuguese frigate and leaving the new African country to its fate.

spun out of any one party's control, inaugurating a cycle of violence in Angola which was to continue well into the next century.

**The Soviet Union massively increases military aid to the MPLA (March 1975)**

Of all the foreign powers which intervened in Angola, the Soviet Union bears the principal responsibility for escalating the violence in Angola into full-blown civil war. Although not the first to intervene in Angola following the Lisbon coup,[79] the Soviet decision in March 1975 to massively increase military aid to the MPLA (probably as a reaction to Spínola's failed coup and the spreading fighting in Angola) fundamentally altered the nature of the Angolan conflict, the sudden injection of vast amounts of high-tech weaponry unleashing bitter hatreds which had been brewing between the liberation movements over the previous thirteen years. Although the Soviets did try to persuade the MPLA to heel its internal rifts – and at one point even suggested a merger with the FNLA – their simultaneous weapons programme gave the MPLA the opportunity to field thousands of well-equipped soldiers at a time, encouraging the MPLA to use its growing military might to exterminate its Angolan rivals rather than negotiate with them. Of course the MPLA was not the only Angolan party responsible for escalating the conflict in Angola – the FNLA bears equal responsibility for internationalising the war. But the FNLA's rewards for bringing in foreign backers were meagre compared to what the MPLA received from the Soviets, and even in late July when the first American arms belatedly began to arrive, they were shown to be hopelessly out-classed by the modern weaponry and equipment provided by the Soviets.[80] On 25 March 1975 the first 30 Soviet cargo planes loaded

[79] As noted above, the Chinese were the first to intervene significantly in Angola by launching a military aid programme for the FNLA in early 1974. However, they clearly had not anticipated the sudden collapse of the Portuguese Empire, and from late 1974 they were unwilling participants in Angola's descent into civil war. China was clearly out of its depth in Angola and was the only foreign power to publicly withdraw from the conflict (on 24 October 1975), hoping that by staying out of internal African matters it might achieve better relations with sub-Saharan Africa.

[80] By Independence Day the Soviets had delivered nearly $225 million of military equipment to the MPLA, and by the end of the 'Second Liberation War' (March 1976) this had risen to a total of $400 million. In comparison, the CIA – hamstrung by two public enquiries and eventually cut off from further funding by the 1976 Defense Appropriations Bill (which included the infamous 'Clark Amendment') – didn't even manage to spend all of its comparatively tiny $31.7 million budget for Operation IAFeature (see below) (Stockwell, op. cit., pp.207 & 216). Mobutu was partly responsible for some of the FNLA's out-dated weaponry, as most of the arms sent by the USA passed through his hands first, and he was not averse to keeping the most modern equipment for his own army while

with military supplies for the MPLA landed in Brazzaville,[81] and these were followed over the next seven months by a total of 27 shiploads and a further 30-40 air supply missions, providing the raw material for building the FAPLA into a formidable military force.[82]

The Soviet military aid programme had to overcome several serious obstacles, however, before its full potential could be realised. Initially all military supplies had to be shipped to the MPLA in secret, a complex operation which involved transporting crates of supplies either to Dar-es-Salaam or Brazzaville, stockpiling them there and then smuggling them into Angola overland, by private light aircraft or by foreign registered ship.[83] Attempts to secretly unload military supplies in Luanda were uncovered by the Portuguese authorities which in April 1975 prevented the Yugoslav ship Postoyma from unloading a cargo of jeeps for the MPLA,[84] and it was forced to sail on to Pointe-Noire instead where it unloaded its cargo, setting the pattern for all Eastern Bloc arms shipments for the next couple of months.[85] By July,

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handing on his own out-dated surplus to the FNLA instead. This corrupt policy of the Mobutu government would cost Roberto dear when his forces took on the FAPLA-Cubans at the battle of Quifangondo (see Chapter 5).

[81] Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.20 & Viney, op. cit., p.19. Viney cites Brigadier W.F.K. Thompson's article in The Daily Telegraph on 17 April 1975 as his source (Viney, op. cit., p.19, n48).

[82] Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.A13.

[83] In April 1975 c.100 tons of Soviet arms for the MPLA arrived by air in Dar-es-Salaam from where they were transported either directly to Luanda in a Greek-registered ship (Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.20), or to southern Angola by chartered aircraft (Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.B426). UNITA claimed in November 1975 that most of the Soviet arms for the MPLA had been smuggled overland into Angola, whereas heavy items such as APC's, trucks, jeeps, mortars and rocket-launchers were trans-shipped at Pointe-Noire and sailed directly to Luanda. Lighter weapons such as machine-guns, rifles, pistols, hand grenades and explosives were airlifted to Luanda from Brazzaville (K Chipipa, UNITA pamphlet entitled 'Angola moves towards peace or war' dated 2 November 1975).

[84] Possibly the Postoyma was the ship David Martin mentions being attacked in Luanda harbour, the captain putting to sea after several Yugoslav sailors had been injured in the attack. The cargo was then unloaded into small boats and secretly landed at night near Luanda. For his actions the captain was awarded Yugoslavia's highest award for bravery just before President Tito's death (David Martin, The Cold War: a preliminary assessment of its impact on national liberation movements, post-independence policies and its aftermath, with emphasis on Angola and Mozambique, SARDC (Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre), Harare (Zimbabwe), 18-20 March 1993, p.7).

[85] Probably as a result of the Postoyma incident, during May 1975 four Soviet, two East German & one Algerian ship unloaded arms for the MPLA at Pointe-Noire, after which they were smuggled overland into Angola (African Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.B426). Weaponry from these shipments may have been among six truck-loads of weapons, ammunition and uniforms which were allegedly intercepted by Zairian troops in late July 1975 on their way (through Zaire) from Cabinda to Angola (K Chipipa, op. cit.).

however, either as the result of a secret agreement with the Portuguese authorities[86] – or simply as a result of the increasing anarchy in Luanda – Soviet arms started to be shipped directly to Luanda where they were unloaded under the gaze of the port authorities.[87] The steady flow of arms would continue up until September 1975 when the Soviet Union escalated its military aid programme even further, partly in reaction to the first American arms deliveries to the FNLA, but probably also in support of the growing Cuban operation in Angola (see next chapter).

More worrying for the Soviets, however, was President Ngouabi's vocal support for Cabindan independence, a policy which the MPLA had steadfastly opposed since its foundation. Probably encouraged by the MPLA's miserable lack of success in the 2nd Military Region throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Ngouabi believed that the impending Portuguese withdrawal from Cabinda left the oil-rich enclave up for grabs. By 1974 producing nearly nine million tons of oil per year – the fifth largest oil-exporting region in Africa at the time[88] – and with a native population which was generally hostile to the MPLA and ethnically-related to the Congolese, Cabinda had attracted the attention of not just Ngouabi but also of his rival Mobutu (in neighbouring Zaire), a reflection of the interlocking territorial ambitions in the region.[89] Uneasy since the MPLA had forcibly seized control of Cabinda city from FLEC militants in November 1974, Ngouabi was alarmed in early June 1975 when the MPLA appeared to be taking over the entire enclave,[90] and in an attempt to keep his dreams of annexation alive he slowed down Soviet military shipments in Brazzaville, hoping this would weaken the MPLA's grip on the enclave. Coming at a

[86] See next chapter for a discussion of Cuban-Portuguese cooperation in the lead-up to Angolan independence.

[87] In July 1975 the Cypriot ship Sunrise, the Congolese ship Mayombo, and a Czech & Yugoslav ship all unloaded Soviet military supplies for the MPLA in Luanda, including tanks, heavy artillery and rocket-launchers (Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.20 & Chipipa, op. cit.).

[88] The first four were (in descending order) Nigeria, Libya, Algeria & Gabon (Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.B433).

[89] Eager to stake a claim in the upcoming 'Scramble for Cabinda', Ngouabi instructed his Prime Minster Henri Lopes to make a statement openly supporting Cabinda's right to self-determination, which he did on 29 April 1975 (Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.54.). A month later (on 20 May 1975) Zaire struck back, Mobutu declaring in a speech given in Kinshasa that he did not consider Cabinda part of Angola and that the enclave should have a referendum to decide its future – a future he clearly intended to include Zaire.

crucial moment for the MPLA (which was attempting to expel the FNLA from Luanda at the time), the slow-down brought an immediate response from Neto who at the beginning of July went to Brazzaville in person to get the flow of arms restarted. Soviet pressure was clearly applied,[91] for arms shipments gradually resumed, but the inability of the Soviet arms programme to deliver weaponry quickly to the MPLA cadres fighting in Angola would continue to dog Neto in the run-up to independence, and would be a major factor in his decision to turn to Cuba for help.[92]

**The USA steps up its support for the FNLA (July 1975)**

The ambitious Soviet military aid programme and Angola's general collapse into anarchy did not escape the USA's attention, and on 27 June 1975 the NSC requested an options paper on Angola from the CIA's 40 Committee. Submitted on 14 July, the paper concluded that the MPLA was strong enough to take control of Luanda and the surrounding area (which it did two days later), and recommended a covert CIA operation in Angola to bolster the FNLA's forces which had lost their military advantage.[93] Authorised by President Ford two days later, 'Operation IAFeature' grew from an initial budget of $6 million to a total of $31.7 million by mid-November 1975,[94] but throughout its duration it was to suffer crippling restrictions which fatally compromised its chances of success. Above all its objectives were too limited –

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[90] On 3 June 1975 fighting broke out between MPLA and FNLA militants in Cabinda city, culminating in the FNLA's expulsion three days later. 11 MPLA and FNLA cadres were killed in the fighting, among them Gilberto Teixeira da Silva 'Jika', a leading member of the MPLA's Central Committee.

[91] Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Afanasenko on 4 July, Neto thanked him for continued Soviet support for the MPLA and optimistically noted Ngouabi's recent decision to stop backing FLEC (Westad, op. cit.).

[92] According to Westad (op. cit.), Ngouabi's refusal to continue Soviet use of Brazzaville as a weapons entrepôt for the MPLA in August 1975 forced the MPLA to turn to the Cubans for assistance, directly leading to their decision to send military personnel to Angola (see below). Ngouabi was only finally persuaded to support Cabinda's full incorporation into Angola in November 1975 when the scale of both the Zairian and South African invasions of Angola had become clear (Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.54).

[93] Stockwell, *op. cit.*, p.55.

[94] Operation IAFeature – 'IA' representing the CIA country code for Angola and 'Feature' the code-name for the operation – grew steadily in size throughout 1975, eventually consuming all that was left of the CIA's Contingency Reserve Fund for covert operations. On 27 July Ford authorised an $8 million increase in the budget, and on 20 August a further $10.7 million as the scope of the operation grew. In October the CIA attempted to side-step budgetary restrictions by requesting from Congress $79 million in emergency military aid for Zaire (which would be handed on to the FNLA), but this was rejected. Finally, on 14 November the last $7 million was committed to IAFeature, but by that stage it was arguably too late to affect the course of the fighting in Angola (Stockwell, op. cit., pp.21, 55 & 162).

seeking only to shore up the FNLA rather than actually install it in power – and as a result of sloppy intelligence work (a weakness characteristic of all CIA operations throughout the 1970s) they tended to lag behind events on the ground.[95] Thus as late as July the CIA was still clinging to the belief that the Angolan dispute would be resolved by the elections due to take place in October 1975, when the expulsion of the FNLA and UNITA from Luanda that month had shattered all hopes of those elections ever taking place.[96] Ironically the very day CIA Task Force Chief John Stockwell finally visited the FNLA's forward base at Caxito (14 August 1975) the Transitional Government collapsed, in one fell swoop invalidating the CIA's entire strategy. Overtaken by events – and with all further attempts to expand the operation blocked by Congress – IAFeature would become, in Stockwell's words, "self-limiting: too small to win [whilst] at the same time too large to be kept secret".[97]

**The South Africans start to intervene in Angola (8 August 1975)**

By this stage, the Americans were coordinating their activities with the South Africans, the last major foreign military power to get in involved in Angola aside from Cuba (which is dealt with below). The SADF had been closely co-operating with the Portuguese military in southern Angola since the late 1960s, setting up a joint air command post in Cuito Cuanavale and providing aircraft and troops for the various offensives launched against the MPLA during the early 1970s.[98] However, it

[95] So poor was American intelligence on the Cuban troop build-up in Angola, that during a short visit to Caracas in February 1976 Henry Kissinger admitted in private to Venezuelan president Carlos Andrés Pérez: "Our intelligence services have grown so bad that we only found out that Cubans were being sent to Angola after they were already there" (quoted in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.41). See Stockwell (op. cit., pp.179-180) for an analysis of the Pike Committee report (published in April 1976) – detailing numerous CIA intelligence failures over the previous decade.

[96] A report by the 40 Committee on 14 July 1975 recommended only that the CIA attempt to "prevent an easy victory by Soviet-backed forces in Angola" by strengthening the FNLA's general position in Angola (cited in Stockwell, op. cit., pp.45-46). Stockwell was appointed Chief of the Angola Task Force on 30 July 1975, his mission to bolster the MPLA in the lead-up to elections in October. Stockwell was astounded that the CIA did not intend to win in Angola, a strategy he was convinced could only fail (he was proved right). Indeed at no stage did President Ford ever authorise the explicit objective of putting the FNLA in power in Angola (though the option was discussed in November 1975), but opted instead for a low-key covert military aid programme which never amounted to more than a tenth of its Soviet rival's.

[97] Stockwell, op. cit., p.68.

[98] As a result of South African involvement in 'Operation Attila', in March 1972 SWAPO alleged that the SADF had massacred an entire village in the Caprivi Strip (which is part of Namibia). The SADF immediately denied the allegation, but when Swedish journalist Per Sanden produced film he claimed

was the development of the joint hydroelectric scheme on the Cunene river which finally gave South Africa a direct interest in southern Angola, the 600-million-rand installations providing extensive irrigation and electricity to the poorest parts of Ovamboland (Namibia). The collapse of Portuguese rule in Angola and Mozambique in 1974 was thus greeted with consternation in Pretoria, not least because South Africa had viewed the Portuguese Empire as a useful 'buffer state', the permanence of which guaranteed the continuation of apartheid in South Africa. Once it became clear that the MFA not only intended to pull Portugal out of Africa as quickly as possible, but that it also favoured an MPLA-dominated government in Angola, South Africa's entire regional defence strategy was thus put in jeopardy. Paranoid that under a Marxist-oriented (and anti-apartheid) government SWAPO would be allowed to set up bases in southern Angola from where it could infiltrate northern Namibia undetected (a fear which was shown to have been well-founded following Angolan independence), South Africa began to take an increasing interest in the situation evolving in Angola, and as Portuguese authority began to crumble Pretoria decided to take matters into its own hands.

South Africa's overriding priority was the security of the Cunene hydroelectric project, part of which was located inside Angola at Calueque, 15 miles north of the Namibian border.[99] After the withdrawal of the Portuguese garrison stationed there in July 1975 security in the area had deteriorated sharply, and following armed clashes between MPLA & FNLA forces in the area on 6/7 August 1975, a small South

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to have shot there showing the burned remains of an African village and rotting corpses, even Foreign Minister 'Pik' Botha suspected the allegations were true. It was only many years later at a dinner with General Geldenhuys that Andreas Shipanga – one of the original founders of SWAPO and a master in the use of disinformation as a weapon of war – admitted that the entire incident had been fabricated by SWAPO. It turned out that the village in question was actually ten miles inside Angola (there was no such thing as GPS in those days, and there is no clear border between South Africa and Angola in the Caprivi Strip as it is a political rather than a natural boundary) and that the massacre had probably been carried out by Portuguese 'Flechas' (commandos) during Operation Attila (author's interview with Helmoed-Römer Heitman, Cape Town, 22 November 1998 & Steenkamp, op. cit., p.23). The damage was done to the SADF's reputation, however, and to this day many writers are unaware that the story was in fact a fabrication.

[99] Calueque performed two essential functions in the hydroelectric/irrigation project: first, it regulated the flow of water to the underground generating plant at Ruacaná (Namibia) which produced electricity for all of northern Namibia and some of southern Angola; and second, it pumped water from the Cunene river along 200 miles of specially-constructed canals into arid areas of Ovamboland. Thus the economic well-being of much of northern Namibia depended on the protection of Calueque, a task

African force crossed the border and occupied Calueque on 8 August.[100] Four days later the Portuguese government was informed that a '30-man patrol' had occupied Calueque in order to 'protect the workers' from factional fighting in the area.[101] The Portuguese government protested – but only weakly, for although it had not authorised the incursion it was itself guilty of violating the security commitments it had made six years previously (under which Portugal pledged to protect the Calueque installations and their workers from attack). With Calueque under South African control, it was only a matter of time before the SADF was drawn into the conflict in southern Angola, given SWAPO's dramatic escalation of the 'Border War' in the early 1970s. In April 1974 the SADF had been called in to take over responsibility for border security and counter-insurgency operations in the area (which were beyond the capability of the police), and that June had launched a series of operations against SWAPO along the Namibian border, forcing hundreds of Namibian refugees to flee into southern Angola, further destabilising the area.[102] In the period between June 1974 and the South African invasion in October 1975 there were numerous reports of South African incursions into southern Angola, many allegedly directed against the MPLA.[103]

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performed by the Portuguese until their rapid decampment in July 1975, leaving the project open to potential SWAPO attacks (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.39).

[100] The SADF force – consisting of one infantry platoon and two armoured cars, perhaps 30 men in total – was under the command of Brig. Wally Black, and encountered weak resistance from UNITA troops it ran into on Calueque's outskirts. That evening a detachment from the SADF Infantry Battalion stationed in Walvis Bay (Namibia) was flown in and remained in Calueque guarding the installations until the final South African withdrawal in March 1976 (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.39). Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.12) date the South African occupation a day later, but their claims that the South African force was made up of 1,000 troops, armoured cars and helicopters seem exaggerated.

[101] Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.36.

[102] According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.11), the South African actions forced many native Namibians into the arms of UNITA which had just set up offices in Pereira d'Eça (N'Giva). From there they were immediately directed to Luso (Luena) from where they were shipped to UNITA training camps in Zambia. This was part of the SWAPO-UNITA alliance at the time (the alliance disintegrated in August 1975 once SWAPO became aware of UNITA's assistance from South Africa).

[103] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., pp.13-14) allege that the SADF launched a major operation directed against the MPLA in and around Pereira d'Eça (N'Giva) in August 1975. According to them, on 21 August South African armoured cars crossed the border at Santa Clara (24 miles south of N'Giva) fired on the MPLA base, looted a local supermarket and withdrew leaving offensive anti-MPLA slogans on the immigration control point. Five days later, following UNITA's expulsion from N'Giva by FAPLA forces, a force of more than 30 armoured cars, Unimog trucks and three helicopter gun-ships then attacked an MPLA training camp at Namacunde (19 miles south of N'Giva) and captured Chiede (20 miles east of N'Giva). The following day they allegedly attacked N'Giva, this time with 18 helicopters and 29 troop carriers, killing dozens of Angolans and severely damaging the town. The MPLA-run Jornal de Angola reported that c.600 SADF troops supported by twelve armed helicopters & several Panhards destroyed N'Giva on 22 August (article entitled 'Metamorfoses da agressão a Angola' by A.

## Birth of South African alliance with the FNLA & UNITA (May-September 1975)

Given the South Africans' devoutly anti-Communist ideology, it was almost inevitable that some sort of alliance would emerge with the anti-MPLA forces operating in southern Angola, although the SADF's relations with Chipenda and Savimbi were far from harmonious. Initial contacts with Chipenda's disgruntled MPLA outcasts in August 1974 bore little fruit,[104] and meetings the following March and April with Savimbi also ended in failure, his rejection of South African suggestions he ally with the FNLA persuading the SADF to let the contact lapse.[105] However, in April 1975 – under pressure from Foreign Minister PW Botha – President Vorster authorised the SADF to try again, and on 31 May Chipenda was coaxed to Windhoek (Namibia) for discussions on setting up a formal FNLA-SADF alliance. In July Chipenda returned to Windhoek and spent three days hammering out a deal with General Hendrik Van Den Bergh, Director of BOSS (the South African Bureau of State Security), and he subsequently persuaded President Vorster to initiate a military aid programme for the FNLA and UNITA.[106] Later that month South African officials squared the deal with Roberto in Kinshasa, and finally in September

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Muatxiânvua in Jornal de Angola, Luanda, 20 December 1987). Although backed up by eye-witness accounts, the details of the South African force involved in the alleged attack on N'Giva seem exaggerated, especially when compared with South African accounts of the time which mention the ambush and fighting withdrawal of Charlie Company (a platoon-sized force of no more than 30 men) at N'Giva on 27 August, but make no mention of the town's destruction (Ian Uys, Bushman Soldiers: Their Alpha and Omega, Fortress Publishers, Germiston (RSA), 1993, p.176). Thus the possibility that the entire story was in fact MPLA propaganda cannot be dismissed. Intense fighting between the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA did take place in the town – but it was not destroyed, as was confirmed by Battle Group Bravo's commander Jan Breytenbach who described N'Giva as lightly damaged when his troops captured the town the following October (Breytenbach, op. cit., p.40).

[104] Colonel Breytenbach – later commander of Battle-Group Bravo during Operation Savannah – flew to Chipenda's M'Pupa base (situated on the Cuito river, 30 miles north of Calais) in August 1974 to meet the Chipenda faction, but there was some doubt at that early stage as to whether his forces would ally with South Africa (the pariah of Black Africa) and the contact lapsed (Breytenbach, op. cit., pp.4-6).

[105] Savimbi's first known official meeting with a South African Intelligence Officer took place in Paris in March 1975, and this led to the unsuccessful follow-up meeting on 14 April with SADF representatives in Lusaka (Viney, op. cit., p.26).

[106] Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.44. President Vorster agreed to this military escalation on 14 July 1975, but only under intense pressure from Gen. Van Den Bergh (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.44).

Savimbi was brought on board, winning over the sceptical Major-Gen. Viljoen and Gen. Van den Bergh who visited him in Kinshasa.[107]

The South African alliance with the FNLA and UNITA would be problematic, however, for although both movements were violently opposed to the MPLA, they were not natural allies and were equally suspicious of each other's motivations and loyalties. The three main protagonists – Roberto, Savimbi and Chipenda – had been at war with each other for at least a decade, and bitter ethnic and regional enmities between the three allies were never far from the surface. Indeed Savimbi had initially rejected out of hand South African suggestions that he unite with the FNLA, only belatedly entering into an alliance with his former colleague and patron Holden Roberto when UNITA was dragged against its will into the main fighting in Angola.[108] The trick for South Africa would be to keep its Angolan allies apart as much as possible, using each of their forces on separate fronts (and in their traditional areas of support) to push the MPLA northwards towards Luanda. The South Africans' grasp of Angolan politics was weak, however, and they took little time to find out about their new African proxies before entering into a military alliance with them, obsessed with their objective of preventing a Communist victory in Angola. This miscalculation on their part would cost them dear, for once the tide of war turned against the alliance (in December 1975), hostility between South Africa's ill-matched Angolan allies would boil to the surface, erupting in open warfare (see Chapter 5).

**Cuba finally reengages in Angola (August 1975)**

By the time South African troops moved in to occupy Calueque in early August 1975, the Cuban government had finally decided to intervene in Angola, setting in motion

[107] The meeting took place on 15 September 1975. Although initially sceptical of Savimbi's military abilities, both South African generals were won over (not for the first time in Angolan history) by Savimbi's charisma and powers of persuasion, eventually agreeing to his requests for weapons, boots, instructors and anti-tank rockets (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.44). Savimbi – who had been allied with SWAPO up to that point – later explained his volte-face with the following argument: "If you are a drowning man in a crocodile-filled river and you've just gone under for the third time, you don't question who is pulling you to the bank until you're safely on it" (quoted in Bridgland, op. cit., p.137).
[108] UNITA had attempted to stay out of the violence sweeping across Angola from late November 1974 onwards, but was pulled in when on 20 May 1975 its Lobito headquarters was attacked (probably by the MPLA).

the last phase in Angola's escalation to full-blown war. Since Cadelo and Pina's mission to Angola in January 1975, Cuba had shown scant interest in the MPLA's predicament and had allowed contacts to lapse – not even responding to Neto's relatively simple monetary requests – and by the time Neto renewed contacts with the Cubans in May 1975 (through Major Flavio Bravo in Brazzaville) the MPLA's situation had deteriorated sharply.[109] Still waiting for Soviet arms deliveries to arrive in Angola (this may have been why Neto was in Brazzaville at the time),[110] the MPLA was reeling from a second wave of violence unleashed by the FNLA on 28 April, which in five days had left 700 dead and over 1,000 wounded.[111] Furthermore, in early May reports had started to come in that 1,200 Zairian troops had crossed into northern Angola in support of the FNLA, their imminent advance on Luanda threatening to overwhelm the MPLA which would be at a four-to-one disadvantage.[112] Thus when Neto met with Major Bravo his requests were far more urgent, and had evolved from vague notions of training cadres in Cuba into ambitious proposals for a Cuban military training programme to take place in Angola itself.[113] By this stage the MPLA was desperately short of military instructors to train the thousands of raw recruits who were streaming in to join the FAPLA, having been refused Soviet military personnel by Moscow to make up the shortfall (probably for fear of causing American outcry). Neto thus viewed Cuba as the ideal (and perhaps only) ally who could fulfil this role, its own army having just completed an intensive Soviet training and re-equipment programme.

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[109] In 1975 Major Bravo was a leading member the PCC Central Committee, and has been variously described as MINFAR's Chief of Logistics (Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.62) & Deputy Prime Minister of the Cuban government (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.). Major Bravo's presence in Brazzaville indicates that the Cubans were by May 1975 playing a significant role in the Soviet military aid programme, most of which was being channelled through Brazzaville. In 1982 Major Bravo went on to become President of the Poder Popular National Assembly.

[110] According to Westad (op. cit.), Neto was forced to turn to the Cubans for help because of Ngouabi's constant attempts to sabotage the Soviet military supply programme being conducted through Brazzaville, which he halted altogether in August 1975 (see below).

[111] Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.50.

[112] Henriksen, op. cit., p.62.

[113] In addition Neto once more requested $100,000 to transport the weapons arsenal from Dar-es-Salaam to Angola, as well as Cuban specialists to instruct experienced cadres in the use of the modern Soviet weaponry which was soon to arrive (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit. & García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.42).

Once again, however, the Cubans failed to respond to Neto's requests, and he was forced to reiterate them once more when he met with Cadelo in Maputo (Mozambique) in late June.[114] Only at this late stage did the Cuban regime decide to take action, and the following month it initiated the military training programme in Angola which eventually evolved into Operation Carlota.[115] It is highly likely that the Cuban decision was influenced by the visit of the MPLA's most vociferous supporter in the Portuguese government – Rear-Admiral Rosa Coutinho – to Havana in June 1975.[116] During the visit Rosa Coutinho and the Cuban government reviewed the situation in Angola, arranging for the Eastern bloc ships with supplies for the MPLA to be allowed to dock in Luanda, and quite possibly discussing the practicalities of Neto's proposed Cuban operation in Angola. Probably as a follow-up to Rosa Coutinho's visit, on 16 July the Cuban government invited a Portuguese delegation headed by Colonel Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho (the man who had led the Lisbon coup) to Havana to discuss the Cuban programme further.[117] They arrived on 21 July, and during lengthy discussions Castro asked Saraiva de Carvalho to take an official request to the Portuguese government for permission to send Cuban military supplies and instructors directly to Luanda,[118] a request to which Castro later insisted he never received a reply. However, on 24 July (while the Portuguese delegation was still in Havana) Comandante Senén Casas Regueiro – Vice-Prime Minister of MINFAR and

[114] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.. Klinghoffer (op. cit., pp.25 & 119) states that Neto's decision to ask for Cuban support was taken at the suggestion of the Soviet Union which had turned down his requests for Soviet military instructors in June 1975. He nevertheless concludes that such a suggestion by the Soviets was actually 'illogical' as Cuban-MPLA contacts were at the time very close. A close reading of events in early 1975, however, shows that Cuban-MPLA contacts were in fact extremely weak, and it is therefore not implausible that the Soviets would have suggested Neto use Cuban personnel to train his recruits. It is nevertheless likely that their suggestion was more the result of their unease in escalating Soviet involvement than part of a secret 'master plan' to use Cuba as a military proxy force in Angola. The Soviets again allegedly suggested the MPLA ask the Cubans for military instructors during 'Iko' Carreira's visit to Moscow in August 1975, shortly before Argüelles' delegation arrived in Luanda (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.443, n257).

[115] Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.98) has also suggested that the talks Armando Acosta – a leading member of the PCC Central Committee – was holding with Samora Machel at the same time might have contributed to Cuba's decision to increase its commitment to the MPLA. Following independence (25 June 1975), Mozambique began coordinating PALOP support for the MPLA, and Machel probably encouraged Cuba to implement its own military programme for the MPLA in Angola.

[116] Chester A Crocker, High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood, W W Norton & Co., New York, 1992, p.47 & Steenkamp, op. cit., p.44. No Cuban source makes a reference to this visit, so it may have been clandestine.

[117] Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.98.

[118] Marcum dates their arrival on 16 July, but may be confusing the date they were originally invited to Havana by the Cuban government (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.443, n257). According to Viney (op. cit., p.42), Castro made the request to Saraiva de Carvalho on 26 July.

later Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban mission in Angola – flew to Lisbon for more talks with the MFA government, and it appears that the combined result of all these talks secured Portuguese support (or at least compliance) in the upcoming Cuban military operation in Angola.[119]

## The Argüelles mission, 3-8 August 1975

The arrival of 50 Cuban weapons specialists in Brazzaville on 25 July 1975 to help with the deliveries of Soviet arms to the MPLA marked the beginning of Cuba's new Angolan operation, a move which did not go unnoticed by the USA.[120] Having taken the decision to provide some sort of military aid and training to the MPLA, the Cuban leadership sent a seven-man mission under Comandante Raúl Díaz-Argüelles to Luanda to draw up detailed plans for a military training programme which could meet all the objectives laid down by the MPLA.[121] Perhaps feeling somewhat guilty for having ignored Neto's repeated requests over the past six months, on arrival in Luanda on 3 August 1975 Argüelles immediately handed over $100,000 in cash to Neto, enabling him to transport to Luanda the arms stockpiled in Dar-es-Salaam. During their six-day visit, the Cuban delegation – which included Cadelo and Víctor

[119] It is quite possible that Rosa Coutinho formed some sort of alliance with the Cubans, for following his visit to Cuba in June 1975 many of his actions greatly facilitated the Cuban operation. His dispatch on an investigative mission to Luanda on 1 August 1975 (two days before the Argüelles delegation arrived) might have been the direct result of the two sets of Cuban-Portuguese talks which took place in late July, for his immediate actions on arriving in Angola – replacing the anti-MPLA High Commissioner and speaking out in favour of the MPLA – restored the MPLA's dominance in Luanda which it was in danger of losing to the FNLA. Rosa Coutinho may also have been involved in the final collapse of the Transitional Government two weeks later (which effectively handed over most of the country's administration to the MPLA), and his second visit to Havana from 18-24 August – precisely at the time the decision was taken to launch the Cuban operation – strongly suggests that he took some part in it.

[120] The arrival of these Cuban instructors in Brazzaville was later cited by the American government as their first 'indication' that Cuban personnel were directly involved in the Angolan war (Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.443, n256).

[121] Argüelles was a veteran of the Revolutionary War against Batista, fighting in the Havana underground and taking part in several assassination attempts, the most famous of which in 1956 was on Batista himself. He helped smuggle arms into Cuba for Castro's guerrillas, and took part in a successful landing at Santa Lucía (Camagüey). He eventually joined the rebel forces in the Escambray mountains and fought in Che Guevara's final assault on Santa Clara. After the fall of Batista, he held several positions in the National Police and FAR, and from 1971 served on several internationalist missions in Africa and the Middle East, commanding operations Guillaje & Gadamas against the Portuguese in Guiné in mid-1973. He was elected a delegate at the First PCC Party Congress in December 1975, shortly before he was killed in action (Ortiz, op. cit., p.64 & Concepción, op. cit., pp.161-162).

Schueg Colás (who went on to command the FAPLA-Cuban offensive in northern Angola four months later) – met with Neto and various senior MPLA figures, and discussed what shape the Cuban mission should take. Neto envisioned needing around one hundred Cuban military instructors who would be spread evenly among various FAPLA training centres across Angola, and he also requested enough weapons, uniforms and food to equip and feed the FAPLA recruits during their training. As a result of these meetings, Argüelles drafted a proposal for a 94-man military mission which he presented to Fidel and Raúl Castro in Havana on 11 August, three days after his return.[122]

Almost immediately, however, the programme was revised and expanded, quickly growing to a total of 480 Cuban specialists who would set up and run four CIR's (training camps) in Cabinda, Salazar (N'Dalatando), Benguela and Henrique de Carvalho (Saurimo).[123] There over the following three to six months they would form some 4,800 FAPLA recruits into 16 infantry battalions, 25 mortar batteries and various anti-aircraft units. The Cuban force would be supplemented by a team of doctors, communication experts and a total of 115 vehicles, plus all the necessary food, equipment and supplies to support 5,300 men for six months.[124] The decision to expand the operation was apparently a Cuban one, the feeling being that if they were going to send Cubans into the growing civil war in Angola, then there had to be enough of them to fulfil their mission as well as to defend themselves in the event the operation went awry. However, it appears that at the time the Cuban military viewed the Angolan mission in the same terms as the two-year mission to Congo-Brazzaville eight years previously, and expected it to be short-term, lasting around six months

[122] Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.340. The group would comprise 65 officers and 29 non-commissioned officers.
[123] The Angolans had originally envisioned sending small groups of Cuban instructors – perhaps three or four at a time – to over a dozen training camps dotted across Angola, but in an effort to make the mission more efficient (as well as to protect the Cubans being sent) it was agreed to concentrate Cuban forces in four main training camps (Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.340).
[124] The Cubans also sent one thousand tons of petrol for the mission, which may seem a strange decision given that Angola was at the time the fifth largest oil-producing country in Africa. However, the chaotic flight of over 100,000 Portuguese settlers and the increasing anarchy across Angola made fuel difficult to come by, and the Cubans were wise to have provided their own for the mission. The Vietnam Heroico carried 200 tons of petrol in 55-gallon tanks in the hold (with the hatches left open so that the gases could escape), while La Plata was so crammed with supplies that the petrol tanks had to be stored on deck (García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.43).

(although with an option to extend with both parties' consent). The overriding objective would be to train the FAPLA to fight for itself (although the FAR accepted that Cuban instructors might be called on to fight alongside their Angolan allies in dire emergencies), and from the available evidence it appears that the Cuban military did not realise they were initiating a military intervention in Angola which would end up lasting sixteen years, and which would eventually involve nearly half a million Cubans.

**Disagreement over when exactly Cuban troops intervened in Angola**

Feverish preparations for the operation began immediately, and between 20 August and 5 September the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chiefs of MINFAR and the Air Force, plus various other MINFAR Ministers were relieved of their posts to begin planning.[125] Thus – some time between 11 and 20 August 1975 – the military operation which became 'Operation Carlota' was born.[126] What remains unclear to this day, however, is at what point it was decided to expand what was essentially a training mission into a massive military intervention, or whether the 480-man Cuban force in Angola was intended all along to be a springboard for thousands of Cuban troops to intervene in Angola. The Cuban government has consistently maintained that the military programme launched in August 1975 had no sinister hidden purpose other than its stated objective of training and equipping the new FAPLA, and that it was only in the face of the relentless advance of Zairian and South African forces on Luanda that in early November 1975 Cuba was belatedly forced to

[125] Valdés in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.100. It is also possible, however, that the various MINFAR Chiefs were relieved of their posts to begin planning the complex military manoeuvres held in Cuba in late 1975 in honour of the PCC's First Party Congress that December. Nevertheless, these manoeuvres – the largest and most complex in Cuban history – were ideal preparation for the Cuban military forces which intervened in Angola in November, and it is entirely plausible that they were planned with this specific objective in mind.

[126] Gleijeses ('Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.) dates the birth of Operation Carlota in July, when the decision was taken to send Argüelles to Luanda to meet with Neto. However, the final decision to launch the operation appears to have been taken some time between Fidel & Raúl Castro's meeting with Argüelles on 11 August and the date when the first MINFAR Chiefs were relieved of their posts to begin planning the Cuban operation (20 August). Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.112) suggests that the decision was "not made until the last week in August or the first few days of September", while Jorge Risquet is even more vague, saying merely that the decision was taken after the Castro brothers' meeting with Argüelles and that in September the Cubans started to arrive in Angola (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.340).

launch a massive military intervention to save the MPLA (and its own Cuban instructors) from annihilation. Many writers and opponents of the Cuban regime have maintained quite the opposite, however, insisting that the Cuban military intervention in Angola began long before this date, and possibly even before Argüelles' meeting with Neto in August 1975. The evidence for both scenarios is, unfortunately, still contradictory.

The only unquestionably hard evidence which has yet appeared was unearthed by Gleijeses after lengthy research at the PCC Archives in Havana. The vast number of letters, reports and communications between Neto, Argüelles and the Cuban government which he obtained over a period of years appears to confirm the Cuban version of events, dating the arrival of Cuban military personnel in Angola in late August 1975.[127] However, even Gleijeses is forced to admit that many of the documents he requested were classified and have still not been released, and the possibility that some potentially explosive revelations are contained in these restricted documents (revealing the true motivations behind the Cuban operation) cannot be ruled out. Likewise, the official Cuban version's corroboration by several leading figures from the Cuban and MPLA leadership – among them Jorge Risquet and Paulo Jorge – cannot be relied on, given their political bias and the fact that none of them were involved in the key decision-making process.[128] Despite Fidel Castro's subsequent insistence that in August 1975 "there wasn't a single Cuban instructor in Angola" – and that "the first material aid and the first Cuban instructors reached Angola at the beginning of October, at the request of the MPLA, when Angola was being openly invaded by foreign forces"[129] – there is a vast amount of evidence from many contemporary sources which strongly suggests that Cuban combat troops were operating in Angola long before that date.

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[127] I have also obtained a copy of the original mission drawn up by the FAR's General Staff in August 1975 which also appears to confirm the Cuban version of events. See Appendix 1 for full text.

[128] Although Paulo Jorge strongly supports the Cuban version of events, he admitted to me that he was unsure exactly when and in what numbers Cuban instructors first arrived in Angola. Although he clearly believed Cuban claims that combat troops did not arrive until 9 November, he did not witness their arrival in person and based his opinion on his reading of Cuban government propaganda (author's interview with Paulo Jorge). Risquet, though happy to recount the official version of events to Jaime, Barber & Deutchmann (op. cit.), did not arrive in Angola until 3 December 1975 when he took up the position of Chief of the Cuban Mission in Luanda, and is therefore a less than reliable source.

Over a dozen writers, several veterans of the war and numerous newspaper reports of the time have claimed that anywhere between 200 and 300 Cuban military instructors first arrived in Angola in the late spring of 1975, probably some time between March and June.[130] Particularly puzzling is the claim by one Cuban FAR veteran that he was among 1,000 Cuban troops – equipped with artillery, anti-aircraft defences, tanks and heavy equipment – who sailed to Luanda aboard the 13 de marzo in June 1975, arriving in the Angolan capital in early July. According to him, by that time there was already a Cuban base camp established on the outskirts of Luanda, manned by at least 300 Cuban personnel.[131] Although it is possible that this veteran accidentally confused this trip with events from a later Angolan mission, his claim nevertheless coincides with other reports at the time which noted a significant Cuban presence in Pointe-Noire, Porto Amboim and Benguela.[132] Indeed one Cuban soldier captured by the FNLA later admitted that his unit had arrived in Brazzaville in August 1975, over a month before the Cuban instructors officially arrived, and over two months before any combat troops were officially sent from Cuba.[133] Perhaps the reports of the time are in fact half true, revealing that Cuba sent military specialists to Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire in early 1975 to help in the massive deliveries of Soviet military hardware to the MPLA, but not into Angola itself. However, until more evidence comes to light, there seems to be no conclusive answer to the question of when

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[129] From speech given by Fidel Castro at 15th Anniversary of Bay of Pigs invasion (19 April 1976), in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.70.

[130] Ratliff (op. cit., p.144), Domínguez ('Cuban Foreign Policy', op. cit., p.96), Davis (op. cit., p.121), Marcum (The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.273), & Don Oberdorfer in The Washington Post (18 February 1976) date their arrival in 'late spring 1975'. Steenkamp (op. cit, p.36) & Duncan (op. cit., p.129) suggest May 1975, LeoGrande (in Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.23), Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.98), & Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.111) suggest June, while Stockwell (op. cit., p.170), Westad (op. cit.) & Martin (op. cit., p.7) suggest 'summer 1975'.

[131] Author's interview with FAR veteran, Havana, November 1997. The dates of the alleged trip to Angola were repeatedly checked and cross-referenced with the veteran and his wife during the interview, and I am satisfied that the veteran was convinced that he had arrived in Angola in July 1975, even if in reality he might have got his dates confused.

[132] Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.111) cites reports that in July 1975 Cuban personnel started to arrive in Pointe-Noire, and in August in Benguela. Robin Hallett ('The South African Intervention in Angola, 1975-1976', African Affairs, 72, No.309, October 1978, p.355) alleges that on 14 August 1975 Cuban commandos in naval assault vessels helped the MPLA capture Lobito and Benguela, an allegation the Cuban government has denied. Given that Argüelles' mission had left Luanda only a week before and had not finalised plans for the Cuban operation in Angola, the reports of Cuban involvement in the capture of Lobito and Benguela are probably erroneous (though, as always, one cannot be certain that there is not some truth in them).

[133] Press release from Agence Zaire Presse, dated 20 December 1975, cited in Viney (op. cit., p.43).

exactly Cuban military personnel (both instructors and combat troops) first intervened in Angola proper, and on the balance of available evidence it would appear that Cuban did not send any military personnel into Angola until the first advanced group under Comandante Argüelles arrived in late August 1975.

## The Misión Militar Cubana en Angola (MMCA)

Once the decision to launch the mission was taken in mid-August 1975, preparations immediately began to ship the necessary personnel, equipment and supplies to Angola. Contrary to popular belief, the Soviets appear to have taken no part in the decision, showing a noted reluctance for their military personnel to get involved in the Cuban mission. On 15 August 1975 Fidel Castro sent a message to Leonid Brezhnev asking for Soviet transport assistance for the Cuban mission in Angola, as well as the involvement of Soviet staff officers in the planning of military operations for the MPLA – requests the Kremlin refused to grant.[134] At this stage the Soviet government was unwilling to commit its own personnel on the ground in Angola, and while happy to attach military advisors to the MPLA General Command while it was based in Brazzaville, once this moved to Luanda in early August 1975 they refused all requests to accompany it there.[135] Thus the MPLA were left with little choice but to rely almost entirely on Cuban personnel to train, equip and run their military in Angola, effectively handing over total control of the conflict in Angola to the Cuban commanders.[136] The Cubans provided the weaponry for the mission themselves –

[134] The message was sent via Oscar Cienfuegos who gave it to the Soviet chargé d'affairs in Havana, M. A. Masanov, during their meeting on 15 August 1975 (Westad, op. cit.).

[135] On 17 August 1975 Lúcio Lara appealed directly to Ambassador Afanasenko for Soviet staff officers to be sent to the MPLA General Command in Luanda, but his request was rejected (Westad, op. cit.). It was thus inevitable that Cuban staff officers would fill the gap left by the Soviets, helping to draw up a defence plan for Luanda around 19 October, scarcely a week after the last Cuban instructors arrived (Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.342). Afanasenko did however invite the MPLA Defence Minister, Iko Carreira, to Moscow for discussions with the Soviet military, but his talks with them in August allegedly only led to their suggestion he ask the Cubans for staff officers (Westad, op. cit.).

[136] It has also been suggested that by early August President Ngouabi had lost his patience with the MPLA – which he accused of taking aid from him whilst criticising him for supporting FLEC militants in Brazzaville – and he informed the Soviet Ambassador that he would not accept Soviet plans to expand the military supply operation through Brazzaville, cutting off a vital life-line to the MPLA (Westad, op. cit.). The Cubans clearly won him round to their cause, however, for in September he made a five-day visit to Havana during which the final details of the Cuban operation in Angola were

including 12,000 Czech-made M-52 rifles, 133 Bulgarian-made RPG-7's, and dozens of Eastern bloc mortars, light artillery and machine-guns – but due to an agreement signed with the Soviet Union in 1965 forbidding them to pass on Soviet weaponry to a third party, the Cubans did not hand out any Soviet weaponry to the Angolans, a further sign of the Soviet Union's reluctance at this stage to get involved in the Cuban mission.[137]

Comandante Raúl Díaz Argüelles was appointed commander of the fledgling Misión Militar Cubana en Angola (Cuban Military Mission in Angola, MMCA or 'Memeca' as it was often called), and was to report directly to the First Deputy Minister of the FAR, Gen. Abelardo Colomé Ibarra (usually known by his childhood nickname 'Furry') who was in overall command of the operation.[138] General Carlos Fernández Gondín was appointed Chief of Staff and Brig.-Gen. Echué Chief of Operations. The 480 instructors and specialists who would make up the main body of the mission were chosen from the ranks of the FAR as much for their willingness to volunteer for the internationalist mission as for their ideological soundness, a selection procedure which was almost identical to that used for the Congo and Guiné missions in the late 1960s.[139] On 21 August 1975, a small advance party under Argüelles flew to Luanda via Lisbon (the only viable route to Luanda at the time), and in early September it was joined there by several other small groups of Cubans (some of whom were held up for a week in Lisbon by visa formalities).[140] The Cubans travelled incognito, were

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probably discussed, and then in October a Cuban delegation under PCC ideologue José Llanusa visited Brazzaville to iron out the details.

[137] The only notable Soviet weapons used in the mission were 480 AKM's (a modernised version of the AK-47), all of which were used exclusively by the Cuban instructors as their personal weapons.

[138] Furry was one of the founding members of M-26-7, and joined Castro's guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra in March 1957, taking part in their attack on Uvero (Oriente) before joining Raúl Castro's front in the Sierra Cristal. After the fall of Batista he was sent to Bolivia and Argentina to prepare Ricardo Masetti's guerrilla operation, and following the annihilation of Masetti's column in April 1964 he returned to Cuba where he held several posts in the government and army. In December 1975 he would be named Chief of MMCA, and in 1986 would be promoted to the Politburo, the Council of State and (in 1989) to Chief of MININT. Furry is currently the only Cuban officer to have attained the rank of General de Cuerpo Ejército (Field Marshal), and one of only five to be made 'Hero of the Republic', Cuba's highest honour (from interview in Báez, op. cit., pp.17-28 & Domínguez, To Make a World Safe for Revolution, p.257).

[139] It is also likely that – as on all previous Cuban missions in Africa – there was a marked tendency to prefer black Cubans who would not stand out when on operations in Angola.

[140] The next three groups – under the command of Romárico Sotomayor, Ramón Espinosa Martín and Comandante Eulicer Estrada Reyes respectively – linked up at the St John hotel in Lisbon, where they were nearly discovered by the Portuguese authorities while waiting for their visas. One Cuban who

unarmed and their only luggage was clothes, the documents necessary to set up the CIR's, some radio transmitters to maintain contact with Havana, and suitcases full of cash.[141] Meeting with Neto the day after their arrival, Argüelles informed him that the Cuban mission had been expanded to 480 men, news which Neto received with great emotion. As the commanders of the various CIR's started to arrive in Luanda Argüelles held lengthy discussions with Neto and his MPLA colleagues to decide the final size and location of the four CIR's.

**The four Cuban-run CIR's in Angola**

The largest CIR – involving nearly 200 Cubans – would be in Cabinda, a decision which was directly influenced by Castro himself. During discussions with Argüelles' team in mid-August, Castro had criticised them for failing to take into account the geographical isolation of the Cabinda enclave which made it a prime target for an invasion by anti-MPLA forces anywhere along its 130-mile-long border with Zaire.[142] A well-organised invasion force could invade and seize the capital – only 15 miles north of the border – long before the Cuban commanders in Luanda could send reinforcements, and perhaps for this very reason by early November Neto had resigned himself to the loss of Cabinda, a decision against which Castro energetically (and successfully) argued. Instead of giving up the enclave, half of the Cuban force of instructors would be sent to Cabinda under the command of Gen. Ramón Espinosa Martín,[143] and a complex defence plan would be drawn up to protect against any

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was pretending to be a doctor was called on to help a sick child, and he was forced to carry out a phoney examination at the end of which he suggested the child be sent to hospital. His suggestion turned out to be a wise one, for in the hospital they discovered that the child had chronic malaria and was in urgent need of treatment (Báez, op. cit., pp.453-454).

[141] Báez, op. cit., p.453.

[142] Víctor Schueg Colás, one of the officers in Argüelles' team, remembers Castro interrupting his report on the Argüelles' mission to Luanda to ask: "And what about Cabinda?" As Castro saw it, the enclave's strategic location (controlling much of the Gulf of Guinea and the northern approaches to the Congo river) and mineral resources (i.e. oil) made it a prime target for enemy invasion, and he was quite articulate in explaining this to Argüelles' team (and eventually the Cabinda mission's commander, Ramón Espinosa Martín) before they left for Angola (in Báez, op. cit., p.179).

[143] Ramón Espinosa Martín joined M-26-7 in late 1956, and carried out arms-smuggling and sabotage operations before joining the guerrillas in the Escambray in October 1957, later taking part in the capture of Santa Clara (December 1958). After helping round up officers loyal to Hubert Matos in October 1959, Espinosa was sent to the Isle of Pines where he carried out specialist training missions alongside his superior William Gálvez. Espinosa was on one of several military courses he underwent

possible incursion by enemy forces.[144] The remaining 280 Cuban instructors would be split evenly between the three other CIR's, each of which had a specific strategic function to play aside from its training mission. The second CIR in Henrique de Carvalho (Saurimo) would be located in one of the MPLA's core regions of support, and would attempt to regain Neto's influence over the Eastern Front after the damaging Chipenda factional split. The third would be set up eight miles south of Benguela[145] – defending the main invasion route from southern Angola – while the fourth in Salazar (N'Dalatando) would defend the main invasion route from Uíge and Malanje, as well as providing an emergency reserve force which could be rapidly withdrawn to Luanda if necessary. The mission command (MMCA) – numbering 25 men – would be based in Luanda, supported by communications, medical and service teams which would move between the CIR's and Luanda throughout the mission.

**The Cubans set up their training operation (September-October 1975)**

Throughout September – as small groups of Cuban specialists trickled into Luanda on commercial flights, reaching nearly 100 by early October – the fledgling CIR's were set up, and preparations began for the arrival of the bulk of Cuban instructors who were expected some time in early October. Both Argüelles and Neto were keen for Espinosa to travel to Cabinda as soon as possible, and it was decided to send him ahead with Captain Martínez while the five other officers in his group followed him there when the opportunity arose.[146] Neto's promises to organise air transport (a ship would have taken too long) never materialised, and after waiting for three days Espinosa hired a Portuguese pilot to fly him there, claiming he was an Argentine journalist reporting on the oil industry.[147] Espinosa arrived in Cabinda in early September 1975, and after meeting the local MPLA commanders – among them

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in Cuba when he was appointed to MMCA in late 1975 (interview with Espinosa in Báez, op. cit., pp.447-452).

[144] Argüelles' decision to send nearly half his forces to Cabinda would have serious consequences later on, however, and would lead to some tension with Espinosa when Argüelles recalled many of these men to Luanda as reinforcements against the growing FNLA-Zairian threat (see Chapter 5).

[145] This was named the 'Comandante Jika' CIR in honour of the MPLA militant who had died fighting in Cabinda only months before.

[146] The other officers in Espinosa's group were Nodarse, Costilla, Martínez, Guerra, Gómez & Piñeiro (Marina Rey Cabrera (ed.), La Guerra de Angola, Editora Política, Havana, 1989, p.27).

Pedro Maria Tonha ('Pedalé'), Minister of Defence and MPLA chief in Cabinda[148] – he set off on a detailed reconnaissance of the Zairian border area.[149] Espinosa was soon joined by a second group of officers under Comandante Vásquez who flew in to Cabinda via Moscow,[150] and after lengthy discussions it was decided to set up the principal CIR at Dinge in the Mayombe foothills (50 miles north-east of Cabinda city), with an auxiliary CIR at Lândana (modern-day Cacongo, Cabinda's second largest port 20 miles north of Cabinda city) whose instructors could be withdrawn to Cabinda city in an emergency – a precaution which was later shown to have been wise.[151] A recruitment centre was also set up in the interior at Belize (over 100 miles from Cabinda city by road) where FAPLA recruits for the 1st FAPLA Battalion were registered, organised into small units, and then sent to Dinge for training.

On 30 September, seventy of the Cabinda CIR's 200 Cuban instructors left Havana aboard an ageing Britannia, flying via Barbados and Bissau to Brazzaville where they transferred to an An-26 (lent by the Congolese army) and were then flown on to Pointe-Noire, completing their journey to Cabinda city by road.[152] Their arrival there on 4/5 October 1975 coincided with that of the first Cuban supply ship to reach Angola – the Vietnam Heroico – which docked at Porto Amboim on 5 October. The

[147] En route they flew over Ambrizete (N'zeto) and São António do Zaire (Soyo) where Espinosa was able to observe FNLA and Zairian forces gathering for the planned assault on Luanda.
[148] The group also included the FAPLA political commissar for Cabinda, Eurico (who was later assassinated in the May 1977 attempted coup), the FAPLA Chief of Security Delfín Castro, the FAPLA Chief of Operations, Fugotón, and the FAPLA Chief of Staff for Cabinda, Bolongó (Rey, op. cit., p.28).
[149] During his reconnaissance Espinosa also visited Pointe-Noire and made arrangements for the arrival of the Cuban ships and personnel – led by Comandantes Rafael Vásquez & Reynaldo Reyes 'Marino' – who would be taking the circuitous (though less conspicuous) Havana-Moscow-Brazzaville-Pointe-Noire route (Báez, op. cit., p.455).
[150] Rey, op. cit., p.29.
[151] Although no Cuban personnel were allowed near the American-owned oil installations, Espinosa nevertheless kept their small airstrip under constant observation as it could easily have been used for enemy landings. Although the fighting never reached these installations, the Americans unilaterally decided to withdraw their personnel in October 1975, leaving the Cubans to protect their oil installations (Báez, op. cit. p.456), an ironic relationship which was to continue throughout the 1970s and 1980s.
[152] Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.342. Rey (op. cit., p.29) notes the arrival (in two groups) of 140 Cuban officers under Comandante Reyes in late September, so presumably a second group of 70 Cubans arrived in Cabinda shortly after 30 September. The arrival of these Cubans in Brazzaville on 30 September may have been the source of Klinghoffer's assertion that Cuban troops started to be shipped from Cuba to Angola via Brazzaville on 30 September 1975 (op. cit, p.112), but it appears they were travelling directly to Cabinda and not into mainland Angola as he alleges.

three Cuban ships – the Vietnam Heroico, the Coral Island[153] and La Plata – had started preparations for the mission in early September, and between 16 and 20 September had set sail for Africa.[154] The first two headed for Porto Amboim (where by some accounts a Cuban camp had recently been set up by Cuban instructors),[155] arriving on 5 and 8 October respectively, and they immediately started unloading their cargo of supplies, weaponry and Cuban instructors for the CIR's at Benguela, Salazar (N'Dalatando) & Henrique de Carvalho (Saurimo).[156] There were, however, some problems with the trucks which had not been properly stowed on the Vietnam Heroico and Coral Island and which as a consequence had been significantly damaged during the transit, and they required several days of time-consuming repairs before they could be driven to the CIR's.[157] On 9 October La Plata anchored off Pointe-Noire, and two days later unloaded military supplies and the final group of Cuban instructors for the Cuban mission,[158] completing the 200-man force and bringing the grand total of Cubans in Angola to around 500.[159] The Cubans worked against the clock to get

[153] Jorge Risquet also refers to the Coral Island as the Oceano Pacífico, possibly the ship's company name.

[154] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.. Fidel Castro personally saw off each of the ships, commenting: "At any rate you'll be more comfortable than on the Granma" (quoted in García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.43). Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.112) dates the departure of the first Cuban ship on 8 September 1975 and its arrival on 27 September, but it is not clear what evidence his claim is based on.

[155] Africa Contemporary Record, 1975-76, op. cit., p.A8.

[156] Márquez notes that: "No one had given permission for them to come. But nor had anyone opposed it" (quoted in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.43), a reflection of the Portuguese authorities' ambivalence towards Cuban intervention in Angola, or their possible support for it.

[157] Argüelles complained about the condition of the trucks in his first report to 'Furry' after the ships' arrival in Porto Amboim: "[The trucks] arrived in poor condition... and we had to repair a great many of them... When I told you how important it was that the equipment arrive in good condition I was thinking about this kind of problem, because I knew that we would have to transport most of the men and material in our own trucks. The distances here are very great... and there are neither mechanics nor spare parts..." (quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.).

[158] UNITA later reported that La Plata had unloaded "approximately 50 black Cubans in battle dress... with full equipment, including 49 lorries, two tanks and a considerable number of crates" (Chipipa, op. cit.).

[159] MMCA was nominally made up of 480 Cubans – including 390 instructors and 17 doctors – but this was supplemented by a handful of civilian pilots who had been sent at Argüelles' request to fly some of the MPLA's small civilian aircraft, in addition to various air traffic control and cargo handling specialists who were also attached to MMCA at this time (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.). Numerous writers have since claimed that Cuban forces in Angola were far more substantial. Edward González (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.22) estimates that there were roughly 1,000 Cuban troops in Angola by mid-September 1975, in addition to the 250 Cuban military advisors. In an interview given on 19 October, Savimbi claimed that 750 Cuban soldiers had landed in southern Angola over the previous week, a claim which UNITA inflated to 3,000 five days later. Finally, on 23 October Radio Lusaka reported that 1,000 Cuban troops had been transported to Luanda from Congolese waters (Valdés in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.101), the same day that The Times reported that between 1,100 and 1,500 Cuban troops were in Angola supporting the MPLA. However,

the CIR's operational as soon as possible, and only the Henrique de Carvalho (Saurimo) CIR failed to meet the 20 October deadline.[160]

Argüelles' mood was upbeat, and on 1 October he noted optimistically in a report to 'Furry' that "[t]he present military situation favours the MPLA".[161] At that point Argüelles had every reason to believe that over the following six months his Cuban team would build the FAPLA into a formidable fighting force which could bolster the MPLA as it fought for supremacy in Angola following independence. Little did he realise, however, that his Cuban team would have less than one month – and in some cases only a few days – to prepare the unseasoned Angolan recruits for battle. For unknown to him the South African government had decided in early October 1975 to send an invasion force into Angola, setting the SADF on a direct collision course with the Cubans.

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all of the above claims can be easily dismissed either as propaganda (especially the UNITA claims) or as exaggerated reporting of actual events. Cuban instructors did arrive in Congo-Brazzaville and southern Angola during this period, and inflated estimates of their numbers may well have been influenced by the vast amount of equipment they unloaded – the majority of which was intended for the 4,800 MPLA recruits they were due to train – suggesting far greater Cuban forces than were actually present. Nevertheless, given the Cuban government's proclivity for secrecy and its readiness to alter facts to fit the political agenda, the possibility that there were many more Cubans in Angola in early October 1975 – including combat troops – cannot be easily discounted.

[160] The principal reason for this appears to have been Henrique de Carvalho's physical distance from Porto Amboim (roughly 800 miles) across which the Cubans had to transport their supplies and personnel in faulty trucks.

[161] Quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

# Chapter 4

## Operations Savannah and Carlota

## October – November 1975

The South African invasion of Angola in October 1975 initiated the final phase in Angola's complex and lengthy escalation into full-scale civil war, and provided the final catalyst needed to trigger Cuba's massive military intervention, unleashing the vast amount of military hardware which had been pouring into Angola over the previous eighteen months. The launch of Operations Savannah and Carlota – as the South African and Cuban military interventions in Angola were code-named – would bring the Cold War right into the heart of sub-Saharan Africa, and would provide each of the Angolan warring parties with a proxy force to fight its corner. The FNLA – whose leader Roberto enjoyed close ties with Mobutu's regime in Kinshasa – would draw on several battalions of Zairian troops to strengthen its advance on Luanda; UNITA would rely on South African military instructors, weaponry and armour to turn it into a recognisable military force; and the MPLA would eventually receive the backing of the entire Cuban military machine, a devastating weapon which would ultimately prove more than a match for the MPLA's opponents. Goaded on by the American government – which was restrained by the US Congress from escalating its commitment to the Angolan War any further – the South African government believed that by intervening in Angola it could install its Angolan proxies in power and shore up apartheid for the foreseeable future, and as a result of its overconfidence it launched an open-ended military operation which lacked clearly-defined objectives, and which depended on fractious and unreliable Angolan allies. The end result of this reckless policy would be to precipitate South Africa's most traumatic military defeat of the Cold War, and set the stage for aggressive SADF involvement in southern Angola for the next thirteen years.

## Growing South African involvement in Angola in the lead-up to Operation Savannah, September-October 1975

As discussed in the previous chapter, South Africa had first intervened in Angola on 8 August 1975 (the same day the Argüelles mission left Luanda) when a small force occupied the Calueque hydroelectric installations, and then with the fighting intensifying across Angola the SADF had been drawn into an uneasy alliance with the FNLA and UNITA. Pretoria's Angolan allies were disorganised and spread unevenly across Angola, however, and during September 1975 (as the Cubans were setting up the CIR's) South African military instructors set about forming them into a more cohesive and effective force.[1] In late August the SADF moved Chipenda's FNLA guerrillas from Serpa Pinto (Menongue) where they had been mostly inactive back to their camp at M'Pupa (in Cuando Cubango) for a month's intense military training. On 23 September 1975 Savimbi then received his first SADF liaison officer – Cmdt Van der Waals – who helped set up a UNITA training camp at Calombo (near Silva Porto [Kuito-Bié]) as well as prepare the defences of Nova Lisboa (Huambo).[2] He was joined a few days later by nineteen other SADF instructors who set about forming the thousand-odd recruits gathered in the camp into two UNITA infantry brigades.[3] Within days of their arrival, however, news arrived that no fewer than three large FAPLA columns were moving on Nova Lisboa, each from a different direction.[4] A mobile attack unit – Battle-Group Foxbat – was hastily formed from a company of UNITA troops, the SADF instructors themselves and the only three working armoured cars in UNITA's possession at the time.[5] On 2 October 1975 Foxbat set out from Silva Porto under the command of Major Louis Holtzhausen, and three days

[1] The SADF may also have been prompted to step up their direct support for the FNLA and UNITA by a SWAPO missile attack on one of their Namibian bases on 1 September 1975.
[2] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.44.
[3] There is some dispute over the date South African military advisors first arrived in Silva Porto (Kuito-Bié). Marcum (The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.269) dates the arrival of Van der Waals and his 18 instructors on 21 September, whereas Steenkamp (op. cit., p.44) maintains that Van der Waals arrived on 24 September and was only later joined by a total of 19 South African military instructors. The man who should know when he first arrived there – Van der Waals himself – dates his own arrival on 23 September, the date I have chosen (Van der Waals, op. cit., p.xii).
[4] The three FAPLA-Cuban columns were coming from the north (Cela), from the west (Benguela) and from the north-west (Lobito).
[5] UNITA had been given four clapped-out WWII Panhards by Mobutu, three of which South African technicians were able to repair before setting off almost immediately to face the advancing FAPLA columns.

later it clashed head-on with the large FAPLA column from Lobito at Norton de Matos (Caluita).[6]

**The clash at Norton de Matos (Caluita), 5 October 1975**

The engagement started badly for the South Africans when their command vehicle was hit and disabled by the first round from the leading FAPLA armoured car, triggering mass desertion by many of the raw UNITA troops who had never seen combat before. Holtzhausen nevertheless rallied his remaining men, and in fierce exchanges they managed to drive off the FAPLA column, allegedly killing over 100 FAPLA soldiers and knocking out one of their five armoured cars.[7] Foxbat's successful defence at Norton de Matos saved UNITA's biggest prize – Nova Lisboa – from certain capture by the FAPLA, but of far greater significance for the South Africans were the first eyewitness reports of Cuban military advisors fighting alongside the FAPLA. Although these reports might possibly have been erroneous – the Cuban government subsequently insisting that no Cuban military personnel fought alongside the FAPLA until three weeks later at Quifangondo[8] – they were sufficient to convince the SADF commanders that Cuban military personnel had begun to intervene on the side of the FAPLA, prompting alarm in Pretoria. Paranoid about the spread of Communist influence into sub-Saharan Africa, the presence of Cuban officers alongside the FAPLA confirmed the South Africans' worst nightmare scenario, and threatened a Communist victory in Angola which could only be followed by a direct assault on Namibia (and possibly even on South Africa itself). It

[6] Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.113) dates the clash a day later, on 6 October 1975, but Steenkamp (op. cit., p.44) seems more reliable on such details. Viney (op. cit., p.38) dates Foxbat's departure from Nova Lisboa on 4 October.

[7] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.44. Cuba and the MPLA make no mention of this clash in their official history of the war, but neither do they deny it, preferring to ignore this embarrassing reverse at the hands of the South Africans.

[8] Despite Cuban denials, South African claims that Cuban troops accompanied the FAPLA columns are by no means outlandish. After all, Cuban military instructors had been arriving in Angola since late August, and by early October they were the FAPLA's only foreign staff officers. It is thus inconceivable that the FAPLA would have launched such a bold and complex three-pronged advance on Nova Lisboa without Cuban participation. The FAPLA column's heavy defeat at Norton de Matos may explain the Cuban government's later denial that the engagement ever took place, Havana preferring to concentrate instead on undisputed FAPLA-Cuban victories at Quifangondo and Ebo (see next chapter).

is thus no coincidence that within days of the clash at Norton de Matos Pretoria ordered the invasion of Angola.

**American collusion in the South African invasion**

The South Africans were encouraged in their decision to invade Angola by the American government, although this was to be denied by subsequent American administrations in the years following Angolan independence. Although the USA officially maintained a cool relationship with South Africa throughout the early 1970s, contacts between Pretoria and Washington DC were in reality far closer than the American government would have wished to admit, and during this period there were regular security meetings between the CIA and the head of BOSS, General Hendrik Van Den Bergh.[9] Pretoria shared the Americans' paranoia of Soviet expansion in Africa, and the South Africans were keen to establish an informal alliance with the USA to counter this threat, even if diplomatically relations were deadlocked over apartheid.[10] In late 1975 the CIA's efforts to expand its Angolan operation were blocked by American public opinion which was not only hostile to foreign military adventures (following the humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam), but also was highly suspicious of the presidency after President Nixon had been forced to resign in August 1974. Furthermore, in early 1975 the US Congress had launched two separate investigations into the CIA's covert operations, and by late 1975 they had started questioning the CIA about Operation IAFeature just as it was reaching its most critical juncture.[11] It was thus only natural that the American administration

[9] Stockwell (op. cit., p.45) notes considerable contact between the head of BOSS and various CIA station chiefs in Pretoria, Paris and Washington DC during 1975. Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Nathaniel Davis later noted that "[t]here were many people in policy-making positions in the [American] Department of State who were essentially willing to have a funny, ambiguous relationship with South Africa" (interview in 'Cold War', op. cit.).

[10] According to the South African Ambassador to the USA at the time. Pik Botha, "[t]he focus was on Soviet penetration and the possibility of the Soviet Union using unstable situations in Africa to benefit itself, to take root and foment trouble". Nathaniel Davis, later admitted that "[we] did maintain a position of disapproval of apartheid but on the other hand the South African government was extremely powerful" (both interviews from 'Cold War', op. cit.).

[11] On 27 January 1975 the US Senate set up a committee chaired by Frank Church to 'study governmental operations with respect to intelligence activities'. The US House of Representatives responded to this by setting up its own Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Lucien Nedzi, on 19 February 1975 (Christopher Andrew, For the President's Eyes Only, Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush, HarperCollins, New York, 1995, p.405). In the lead-

looked on South Africa as a vitally-needed proxy force which could be used to defeat the MPLA and put the FNLA and UNITA in power, and therefore it actively encouraged Pretoria in its plans to invade Angola.

What remains unclear, however, is exactly what was agreed between the American and South African governments before the invasion was launched. Pretoria is quite insistent that the CIA (and by implication President Ford) gave it the 'green light' for the invasion, promising to extract increased support for the FNLA and UNITA from the US Congress over the following months.[12] Their plan envisioned the South African-backed force capturing as much Angolan territory as possible before Independence Day, after which the FNLA and UNITA could set up their own government and call on the USA for massive military and financial support for the final showdown with the MPLA. According to 'Pik' Botha (who was South African Ambassador to Washington DC at the time): "[t]he United States at the highest level requested... South Africa to go in and assist UNITA", and there is little reason to doubt that the entire South African leadership shared this belief when they took the fateful decision to invade.[13] The reality, however, was quite different, and once full details of the South African invasion began to leak out to the world's press in November 1975, their American allies would be quick to distance themselves from Pretoria, leaving the South Africans perilously isolated. Perhaps Pretoria failed to grasp the full extent of the Ford administration's political weakness at the time, and eagerly embraced an alliance with one of the world's foremost superpowers whilst ignoring the dangerous consequences which the combination of weakened American leadership (under an un-elected president) and a hostile US Congress could have. But whatever its reasoning may have been, *Pretoria launched Operation Savannah under*

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up to Angolan independence CIA chiefs and operatives had to endure gruelling questioning from both committees whilst simultaneously attempting to maintain the covert nature of their operation in Angola, a task which ultimately proved fruitless.

[12] This may have been why on 24 October (ten days after the invasion was launched) the US State Department asked Congress for an emergency package of military aid for Zaire worth $79 million, all of which would be directly handed on to the FNLA. The request was rejected, however.

[13] 'Pik' Botha quoted from interview in 'Cold War', op. cit.. PW Botha – at the time Minister of Defence and from September 1978 President of South Africa – later insisted that the CIA and Henry Kissinger had known about Pretoria's plan to invade Angola and fully supported them. He put the failure of the invasion solely down to the Americans' refusal to honour their promise to support the invasion (both materially and politically), forcing the isolated South Africans to withdraw (author's interview with PW Botha, Wilderness (RSA), 10 November 1998).

the false presumption that it had the full support of the Americans, and this mistake would prove fundamental to the operation's failure.[14]

Pretoria's flawed alliance was made worse by its failure to draw up precise objectives for the military operation, merely ordering the invasion force to capture Pereira d'Eça (N'Giva, 25 miles north of the Namibian border) after which the mission's objectives would be extended as the commanders (and politicians) saw fit. The adoption of this policy was, however, a grave error both by the politicians in Pretoria and by their military advisors, and showed a shameful political immaturity in international affairs. For by intervening militarily in a neighbouring country without any final objectives, Pretoria was initiating a tit-for-tat military escalation, each South African advance drawing an equal Cuban response until the war escalated to a level which Pretoria had neither anticipated nor had the stomach to match. Perhaps Pretoria's decision to invade Angola in October 1975 was merely another example of the lack of respect with which it dealt with its neighbouring African countries, hurling its military might against any regime which it perceived as a threat to its hegemony in the hemisphere (whilst simultaneously crushing dissent at home). It may even have been the result of serious divisions within the South African leadership, Foreign Minister PW Botha and SADF Chief Gen. Viljoen on the one side keen to escalate the operation, whilst on the other President Vorster and BOSS Chief Lieut.-Gen. Van den Bergh sought to restrain it.[15] But whatever their motivations, if the South Africans believed they were in for an easy ride in Angola they were soon to be disabused of this idea as the combination

[14] Pretoria may also have been encouraged by the first opportunity in years to lead an operation which was initially supported by several black African countries – among them Zambia, Zaire and Côte d'Ivoire – potentially ending Pretoria's years of diplomatic isolation and gaining it new allies in the hemisphere (Hallett, op. cit., p.363).

[15] According to Steenkamp (op. cit., p.43-44), President Vorster and Lieut.-Gen. Van den Bergh were uncomfortable with the idea of invading Angola and would have preferred to arm the FNLA and UNITA, and maintain a South African force at Calueque. In contrast, P W Botha and Gen. Viljoen viewed an invasion of Angola as a means of reaching beyond Namibia's borders and striking directly at SWAPO which – as a consequence of the chaos in Angola – had greatly increased its activity in Namibia. Notes written in Gen. Viljoen's notebook shortly after the invasion are revealing of the division in opinion: "It is clear that General Van den Bergh sees this matter as solely a political objective. He dismisses the entire SWAPO threat as meaningless and something which is not a great problem. He says there are no SWAPO terrorists in Angola. That differs from our view. The reason why we tackled this business was because we had in mind the short-term aim of giving SWAPO a coup de grace so that the SWA [South West Africa] strategy could unfold". The result of this division in the leadership was to suck South Africa into a war it did not really want to fight and for which it had not planned. "It was as if there were no helmsman", concludes Steenkamp.

of a poorly-conceived strategy and unreliable allies (the USA foremost among them) turned Operation Savannah into a public relations disaster, ultimately forcing Pretoria into a humiliating withdrawal.

## 'Task Force Zulu'

The invasion force – Task Force Zulu – was hastily assembled from two Angolan groups the SADF had been training since late August 1975, and which over the previous fourteen years had been bitter enemies.[16] The first was designated Battle-Group Alpha – under the command of Cmdt Delville Linford – and consisted of two companies of Bushmen soldiers, many of whom had served in the Portuguese 'Flechas' (elite commandos) as irregular tracking groups which hunted down FNLA and UNITA guerrillas in southern Angola.[17] Their new allies – Battle-Group Bravo under Cmdt Jan Breytenbach – would be three companies of Chipenda-FNLA troops who had been training at the M'Pupa base for the past month, and who less than a year before had been the Bushmen soldiers' most bitter enemies. The total force numbered roughly 500 men, all of them under the command of fourteen SADF officers.[18] Melding these two old enemies together into an effective fighting force would be a tremendous challenge for their South African commanders, and Cmdt Linford's powers of persuasion were tested to the limit the day before his force set off for Angola (12 October 1975) as he tried to persuade his Bushmen troops that the FNLA and UNITA were now their allies. On 9 October Col. 'Corky' van Heerden flew down to the SADF base at Rundu (Namibia) to take command of Operation Savannah, and over the next couple of days the two forces handed over all their South

[16] Data on the formation Task Force Zulu is taken from Uys, op. cit., pp.26-28 & Steenkamp, op. cit., p.46.

[17] Although for political reasons Task Force Zulu was supposed to be a purely Angolan force, Alpha did have five SADF and several Portuguese soldiers fighting among its men.

[18] The dispute over the actual size of Zulu Force is still unresolved, some writers estimating an original force of up to 1,500 men, but it seems clear that when Zulu Force first crossed in to Angola on 14 October 1975 it was made up only of three companies of Chipenda-FNLA and two companies of Bushmen (i.e. five companies of c.90 men). As the campaign progressed Zulu Force (and its sister forces Foxbat, Orange and Elk) gradually grew in numbers, but claims by the MPLA Ambassador to Washington that 6,500 SADF troops were fighting in Angola were absurdly exaggerated. According to the best estimates, at no stage in 1975 were there more than 2,900 South African troops operating in the whole of Angola, only rising above this figure once the South Africans started to withdraw, a force of around 4,000-5,000 troops acting as a rear-guard no more than 30 miles north of the Namibian border (Steenkamp, op. cit., pp.56 & 59).

African weaponry and kit (so as to remove all evidence of South African support for the operation) and were issued in its place with an assortment of light weaponry, Vickers machine-guns and vegetable trucks for transport. On 13 October both groups linked up at Katwitwi (on the Angola-Namibia border),[19] and the following morning they crossed into Angola, initiating Operation Savannah.[20]

## The first phase of Operation Savannah, 14-24 October 1975

When Zulu Force crossed into Cuando Cubango in mid-October 1975, southern Angola was already in chaos. Following the withdrawal in July 1975 of the various Portuguese garrisons stationed there, thousands of white settlers had begun to flee the region with whatever they could take with them, creating a power vacuum which was quickly exploited by disparate bands of MPLA, FNLA and UNITA cadres who attempted to push their rivals out of the area. The MPLA had managed to take control of southern Angola's regional capitals – Pereira d'Eça (N'Giva), Sá da Bandeira (Lubango) and Moçâmedes (Namibe) – but was steadily losing ground to UNITA and the FNLA which had taken control of much of Cuando Cubango and northern Cunene. The latter two movements spent as much time fighting each other as they did the MPLA, however, and by October 1975 the war in southern Angola had evolved into a messy stalemate, each movement skirmishing with and launching sporadic raids against its opponents, whilst making no genuine effort to capture their most important bases. The surprise invasion by what would prove to be a highly-competent South African-led force would radically alter this balance of power, however, and in a little over a week would bring about the total collapse of the MPLA in the region. But it would take some time for the defending FAPLA soldiers to realise that they were up against a South African force,[21] and it would not be until the fall of Sá da Bandeira

[19] Tension between the Bushman and Chipenda-FNLA Battle Groups was adequately demonstrated when the Bushmen in Alpha first caught sight of the FNLA soldiers at Katwitwi and instinctively cocked their weapons.

[20] Most accounts date the start of Operation Savannah on 14 October 1975 (for example Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), p.269 & Steenkamp, op. cit., p.46), however Uys (op. cit., p.28) dates it a day earlier, maintaining that the force crossed into Angola immediately after linking up at Katwitwi. It is unclear who is right here as Col. Breytenbach's first-hand account of the war contains very few dates and is ambiguous on this point.

[21] Breytenbach notes several occasions when the arrival of Zulu Force was greeted with jubilation by FAPLA troops who thought the South Africans were Cubans. The most comical incident occurred on 4

(24 October) that they recognised the true seriousness of the threat posed by Zulu Force.

Zulu Force's first objective was Pereira d'Eça (N'Giva), the provincial capital of Cunene and the principal town on the strategically vital road which runs from the border with Namibia up to Sá da Bandeira (Lubango), and beyond to southern Angola's principal ports: Moçâmedes (Namibe) to the west and Benguela and Lobito to the north. Pretoria was keen to give the impression that the invasion force was entirely Angolan, however, and therefore it ordered the attack to come from the north. As the road between Caiundo and Nehone (the most direct route to N'Giva) had been left unfinished by fleeing Portuguese workers, Zulu Force was obliged to take a roundabout route, speeding north to Serpa Pinto (Menongue), west to Artur de Paiva (Cubango), then south towards Cuvelai which it reached at dusk on 16 October. Cuvelai was by then in UNITA hands, but any illusions the South Africans may have had about their newly-formed alliance were shattered when the UNITA commander (for reasons known only to himself) ambushed Bravo as it entered the town, being driven off only after a noisy fight. The following day Zulu had its first contact with the FAPLA 10 miles north of Evale, a brief encounter which descended into farce when Charlie company got into a noisy fire-fight with itself (they suffered no casualties however).[22] Despite this comical encounter, Zulu Force nevertheless rapidly evolved into a highly-effective fighting machine, as was demonstrated two days later (19 October) when it captured N'Giva with only light casualties.[23] The

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November 1975 (three weeks after the invasion began) when Zulu Force approached Caimbambo (50 miles south-east of Benguela) and two FAPLA officers ran up and kissed Breytenbach, calling him their saviour. It was only when he shouted orders at his troops in Afrikaans to open fire on the FAPLA garrison that the FAPLA officers realised their blunder, and they were immediately taken prisoner (op. cit., pp.88-89).

[22] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.36) recounts the fire-fight in his memoires: "[Suddenly] a tremendous fire fight broke out in the rear. It was, quite honestly, the biggest and noisiest scrap I have ever heard in my life, away from a cinema screen... I found Corky and his headquarters in a ditch alongside the road, taking cover against lead flying in all directions. Charlie company was spread out on both sides, roughly in two halves, pumping rounds away at each other, luckily most with eyes closed and with barrels pointing almost straight up into the sky. There were no FAPLA in sight. It took some doing to stop all shooting which could only be achieved by walking down the centre of the road and shouting at both sides to cease fire... I could not, however, blame C company because in our short period of training they had had the least training of all. All I could do was to have a heart to heart talk with [their Angolan commander] Costa".

[23] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.20) note that the FAPLA Comandante França had left N'Giva on patrol that morning, allowing Zulu Force to occupy the town with little resistance. However, given that

decision to move on N'Giva was, however, in Cmdt Linford's opinion "a bloody mistake",[24] and following the South African withdrawal he would be one of many SADF officers who insisted that had Zulu Force kept going north-west after reaching Serpa Pinto (Menongue), there would have been nothing that could have stopped it from reaching Luanda in a matter of days.[25]

The SADF High Command did not share Linford's appraisal of their strategy, however, having decided on a staged advance northwards, and following N'Giva's capture they ordered Zulu Force to advance immediately on Sá da Bandeira (Lubango) and capture it. The next day (20 October) Zulu Force headed north, linking up with a third force – Battle-Group Charlie – at Roçadas (Xangongo), and that night they camped at Tchibemba, 75 miles south of their objective. The next morning Zulu Force then split in two, Alpha cutting west towards Chiange in order to clear the main towns south of Sá da Bandeira while Bravo headed directly north,[26] and just beyond João de Almeida (Chibia) Bravo ran into the first of several major FAPLA positions, driving them northwards with crippling casualties (see map).[27] Examining the battlefield after one particularly bloody encounter, the South Africans found what they claimed were the first Cuban dead who had been operating the FAPLA's 122mm rocket-launchers, the first physical evidence of Cuban personnel

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Zulu Force had already had at least three clashes with the FAPLA north of N'Giva (at Mupa, Evale and Anhanca) over the previous two days, it is more likely that França fled N'Giva fully aware that enemy forces were advancing on the town.

[24] Quoted in Breytenbach, op. cit., p.29.

[25] Presumably Zulu Force would have gone via Silva Porto (Kuito-Bié), Andulo, Mussende, Malanje and Salazar (N'Dalatando). Cmdt Linford argued that the roads to the north-west were parallel with the rivers and therefore the force could not have been stopped by blowing up bridges, as was the case along the coastal roads. However, given that the Cubans had a large CIR in Salazar and a military presence in Malanje too, it is also possible that had Zulu Force immediately advanced northwards its route to Luanda would have been blocked by the destruction of the Salazar Bridge over the Cuanza river between Mussende and Malanje. The destruction of this enormous bridge over Angola's longest and deepest river would later block Battle-Group Foxbat's advance on Malanje.

[26] Alpha succeeded in clearing Huíla (the village) and Humpata of FAPLA forces before linking up with Bravo and Charlie at Rotunda that evening. Two Bushmen were wounded in fighting at Humpata versus 3 FAPLA dead, 4 wounded and 1 captured (Uys, op. cit., p.31).

[27] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.45) later said of that day's battles: "[The] FAPLA must have suffered numerous casualties because for weeks afterwards convoys moving through these same hills remarked on the almost continuous stench of decaying bodies between João de Almeida and Rotunda. We took no casualties, I think mainly because we brought down a very high concentration of fire very rapidly on the FAPLA positions, followed by a rapid assault by the leading infantry before FAPLA could recover from the shock".

among the FAPLA seeming to confirm Pretoria's worst suspicions.[28] That night Zulu Force camped at Rotunda, destroying three armoured cars in a night attack launched by the FAPLA (Bravo lost one killed), and the next morning it launched a two-pronged assault on Sá da Bandeira, Alpha heading north to capture the heights above the town (including the famous Cristo Rei statue) while Bravo took the airport to the south. Heavier resistance than expected was met at the airport, however, and over 80 FAPLA soldiers were killed and 30 captured before it was secured.[29] Bravo then proceeded to clear the town, at one point destroying a civilian car which turned out to be carrying senior FAPLA personnel, and the following morning captured its last objective – the FAPLA barracks – seizing huge amounts of weaponry, ammunition, uniforms and supplies which had been left behind.[30]

Flushed with Zulu Force's remarkable success (it had captured over 250 miles of Angolan territory in only five days), the SADF High Command immediately ordered Zulu Force to capture Moçâmedes (Namibe) – Angola's southernmost commercial port – in order to provide a stronger logistical base for the South African operation. However, it was still not clear at this stage whether Pretoria had decided to go the whole way to Luanda, and Cmdt Breytenbach's account of the time is revealing of the confusion among Zulu Force's South African commanders (and men) as to their mission's exact objectives. Although they were informed that there would be two

[28] Cuban sources puzzlingly make no reference to any Cuban involvement in the FAPLA's battles with Zulu Force until early November, however. According to Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343), the first Cuban casualties (which were only light wounds) occurred in a skirmish the following day at Quifangondo, and the first fatalities in combat did not occur until 2 November when a retreating FAPLA-Cuban column was ambushed by Alpha on the Catengue-Benguela road. Possibly the South Africans wrongly identified the bodies, but more likely the Cubans have subsequently found it convenient to put back the date of their first losses to the South Africans so as to reinforce the impression that Zulu Force advanced unchecked until its first clash with the Cubans at the Queve river (Cuanza Sul).

[29] Breytenbach, op. cit., p.50. Bravo had one seriously wounded and several other lightly wounded. Among the FAPLA dead was the popular Comandante Dack Doy who was killed manning the mortar (he was the only soldier who knew how to). The FAPLA stand at Sá da Bandeira was their first serious attempt to stop Zulu Force capturing a town, and was probably the result of orders from Benguela to resist until a relief convoy (including Cubans) could arrive (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.21). The town fell before the convoy had even set out from Benguela, however.

[30] The same morning Alpha came down from the Cristo Rei heights but encountered no further resistance in the town. There was one bizarre incident when a FAPLA commander – unaware that the FAPLA barracks had been abandoned the previous evening – turned up for work at 8am only to find the men he thought were Cubans were actually 'Boers'. He was wounded as his car attempted a speedy getaway (the driver was killed) and was later revealed as the FAPLA area commander when checking into a hospital the following day (Breytenbach, op. cit., p.54).

thrusts northward – Zulu Force moving along the coast to open up the ports for logistics, whilst Foxbat took the main route further inland from Nova Lisboa (Huambo) towards Malanje – no one was told just how far north they were expected to go, or (most crucial of all) whether they were expected to capture Luanda before Independence Day.[31] Clearly Pretoria intended to play the situation by ear, confident that the weak resistance Zulu Force had so far encountered would continue as it headed further north. The failure to set either a specific deadline or a geographical objective for Zulu Force would prove a strategic blunder, however, and would inadvertently reduced the pressure on the FAPLA-Cuban forces in northern Angola, giving them the vital breathing-space they needed to reorganise their defences and (eventually) call in massive reinforcements from Cuba.

## The Cuban operation in Angola gets into trouble, late October 1975

Since Argüelles' arrival back in Luanda on 21 August 1975, the Cuban mission had been busily preparing the CIR's, but had almost immediately been distracted from its task by a serious FNLA threat on Luanda. On 30 August FAPLA troops had had their first clash with the FNLA at Quifangondo, a small series of hills nine miles north of Luanda overlooking the main approach road from Caxito. The defence of Luanda was absolutely vital for the legitimacy of any future MPLA government, and probably as a result of this skirmish the FAPLA (possibly with Cuban help) launched an attack on Caxito on 10 September, expelling the FNLA forces and capturing large quantities of American munitions which they paraded before the world's press as evidence of Roberto's CIA backing. The FNLA responded the following day, Mobutu ordering his elite 4th and 7th Commando Battalions to Ambriz to bolster the FNLA force there, and on 17 September they managed to take Caxito back, putting fresh pressure on

[31] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.55) recalls that "we were not quite sure how far north we were supposed to go because nobody really told us. Some among us thought that we would try to capture as much of Angola as possible before 11 November, the official date of independence for Angola, in order to make UNITA's position viable and strong enough to at least counteract the communist-supported MPLA. Others thought that our intention was to capture the Benguela railway, thus cutting the export routes of troublesome neighbours such as Zambia. Still others thought that we would go for Luanda in order to put Dr. Savimbi firmly in the Angolan saddle". He adds that many of his Chipenda-FNLA troops had been told that the final objective was to capture Sá da Bandeira (Lubango) and establish an FNLA bastion there, and that "[t]he result was a deep running feeling of dissatisfaction and resentment when it

Luanda.[32] Over the following weeks formidable FNLA and Zairian forces began gathering there (only 35 miles from Luanda) in preparation for a final assault on Luanda, and it is not surprising that the ever-present danger of attack soon dominated the Cuban commanders' thoughts, perhaps leading them to overlook events in southern Angola. In fairness to the Cubans, it is unlikely they had any personnel in Cunene at the time, and thus it would not be until the fall of Sá da Bandeira (Lubango) that both the FAPLA and Cubans started to realise that they were facing a new and potentially more dangerous threat from the south.

There were further clashes between FAPLA forces and FNLA-Zairian forces at the Morro do Cal (literally 'Chalk Hill') on 26 September, a hilly position between Caxito and Quifangondo which the FNLA intended to use as a springboard for its final assault on Luanda's northern defences.[33] However, Argüelles' team was too busy dealing with the arrival of hundreds of Cuban instructors and equipment to deal with the threat from Caxito, and it was not until 19 October that the Cubans finally helped the FAPLA draw up a comprehensive defence plan for Luanda, one which immediately recognised the Angolan capital's precarious position.[34] Accepting that the FAPLA-Cuban forces in Luanda were too weak to fight off a determined assault from Morro do Cal, on 21 October the CIR at Salazar (N'Dalatando) was shut down and most of the FAPLA's 2nd Battalion which was training there was immediately withdrawn (along with many of the Cuban instructors) to Luanda.[35] That Argüelles should have considered shutting down the CIR only three days after it had started operating is a clear indication of the weakness of FAPLA-Cuban forces in Luanda at the time, and would seem to confirm Cuban accounts which state that there were only around 500 Cubans in the whole of Angola in late October 1975.[36] The FAPLA-Cuban withdrawal from Salazar greatly weakened the MPLA's eastern line of

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became clear to my troops that the war was a long way from over and that they were required to march once more, maybe all the way to Luanda".

[32] Stockwell, op. cit., pp. 163 & 201.

[33] Morro do Cal is famous for a signpost marking 32km to Luanda, the closest the FNLA ever got to the Angolan capital (see photo in Stockwell, op. cit., p.131).

[34] Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.342).

[35] Rey, op. cit., p.44.

[36] The Salazar CIR had begun operating on 18 October 1975 (Rey, op. cit., p.44). Jorge Risquet dates the CIR's opening on 15 October, giving the FAPLA troops who fought at Morro do Cal a total of

defence, and such a drastic move would not have been considered had the situation in Luanda not been so critical. To defend Luanda properly it was vital that the FNLA be driven off the Morro do Cal, and so two days later a combined FAPLA-Cuban force launched an assault on the FNLA-Zairian forces there, the first combat Cuban personnel officially took part in.

## The FAPLA-Cubans attack the FNLA on the Morro do Cal, 23 October 1975

The 1,094-man mixed FAPLA-Cuban force was hastily assembled out of the mostly raw recruits from the Salazar CIR, 58 Cubans (including 40 of their instructors) and two companies of Katangese gendarmes (roughly 200 men) who had recently allied with the MPLA,[37] and was backed by an assortment of mortars, machine-guns and light artillery.[38] On 23 October (the same day Lubango was attacked by Zulu Force) they launched an attack on the combined FNLA-Zairian force dug in on the Morro do Cal which by some estimates numbered nearly 3,500 men.[39] The FAPLA-Cuban force performed poorly, however, and was quickly driven back by a determined counter-attack, only digging in once it had retreated to Quifangondo where it repelled an assault on its positions later that evening.[40] The failure of the attack was as much

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eight days training (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.342). Whichever source is correct, the FAPLA troops had received only the most basic military training by the time they had to fight their first battle.

[37] See the Shaba Invasions in Chapter 6 for full background on the Katangese forces in Angola.

[38] The FAPLA forces totalled 836 men, supported by 82mm & 120mm mortars, one GRAD-1P rocket-launcher, one 76mm gun and various machine-guns. On arriving at Quifangondo they were reinforced by three 75mm guns and one 14.5mm 'cuatro bocas' platoon (Rey, op. cit., pp.44-45 & 50-51). The Cuban forces broke down as follows: Command/HQ: 17 men; with 2nd Battalion from Salazar CIR: 15 men; operating 'cuatro bocas': 4 men; operating 120 mm mortar battery: 20 men. The Katangese troops left to defend Benguela shortly after this battle, and they do not appear to have been missed as their contribution to these first battles appears to have been fairly ineffective.

[39] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.. This figure included 1,200 Zairian troops.

[40] Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.342) described the encounter thus: "It was a skirmish, not a great battle... [T]hey didn't capture Morro do Cal because we attacked, the enemy counter-attacked, it wasn't very well planned, the troops weren't very well-trained. They brought a company of troops from the Salazar school who had no more than a week of training. A week of training! Just think, they started training on 15 October [sic] and they had had eight days of training by 23 October. So they weren't trained troops. And then there were the Katangese who they said were good fighters but were shown there not to be up to much. They said they lost all of the Katangese in that – it was really a skirmish with two wounded, one Cuban wounded lightly, nothing serious. But we couldn't capture Morro do Cal and we withdrew to Quifangondo" (author's translation). Rey (op. cit., p.46) also reports two Cuban casualties that day: the Battalion Commander (who was wounded in the shoulder by a machine-gun bullet) and the Chief Sapper (who was also wounded, but lightly). Following the attack's disintegration into a retreat, four Cuban instructors were left behind in the FNLA's rearguard, one of whom managed to make his way back to the FAPLA-Cuban lines by

the result of the FAPLA soldiers' lack of training (few of the Angolans had received more than a week's worth) as it was of poor intelligence about the enemy, and over the following fortnight the Cuban instructors set about rectifying these weaknesses. Effectively given a two-week breathing-space by the FNLA (the next attack did not come until 5 November), the Cubans oversaw the construction of complex scaled defences at Quifangondo, including underground bunkers and sophisticated defensive weaponry (although it appears that they had no BM-21 missile launchers at this stage). In retrospect, had Roberto persisted in his assault on Luanda at this time, he may well have been able to capture the Angolan capital before huge Cuban reinforcements arrived. But the opportunity was missed, and by the time his combined FNLA-Zairian forces launched a further assault on Quifangondo, they would find themselves up against a far more professional and organised force.[41]

## The FAPLA-Cuban forces reach crisis point – leading to Operation Carlota

The FAPLA-Cuban battles north of Luanda on 23 October 1975 coincided with Zulu Force's attack on Sá da Bandeira (Lubango), an event which should have alerted the Cuban mission to a new and serious threat from the south. The MPLA reacted spiritedly to the news, the same day ordering the general mobilisation of the FAPLA and calling on the people of Angola to resist the invaders.[42] All FAPLA forces were then withdrawn to a holding point at Cacula – a strategically-vital town 45 miles northeast of Sá da Bandeira where the road splits in two, the north branch heading

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nightfall. The other three finally returned two days later. Two Soviet ZIL trucks were also lost in the retreat.

[41] Between 28 and 30 October 1975 Cuban instructors also participated in fighting north of Lucala (20 miles east of Salazar). Although most of the FAPLA-Cuban force was withdrawn from Salazar on 21 October, several Cuban instructors (including the CIR's commander Colonel Frada) and some FAPLA troops remained behind for a few days, being called on to counter a second FNLA-Zairian advance along the other principal road from northern Angola to Luanda. The forces clashed on 28 October at Quiangombe, a small town 15 miles north of Lucala, which the FAPLA-Cubans captured by the end of the day. They then advanced north, capturing Samba-Cajú by 30 October. Two Cubans from the medical team – a doctor and nurse – were lightly wounded in the fighting (Jorge Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343).

[42] The news that South African forces had invaded Angola and that the MPLA had ordered the mobilisation of the FAPLA appears to have finally convinced the Chinese that they were out of their depth in Angola. Believing that their African interests would best be served by keeping out of Angola's internal affairs, the following day (24 October 1975) the Chinese military instructors training the FNLA announced they would be withdrawing immediately, and within three days all of them had left southern Africa (Stockwell, op. cit., p.191 & Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.21).

towards Benguela while the eastern branch continues to Nova Lisboa (Huambo) – and desperate attempts were made by the FAPLA commanders and their Cuban instructors in Benguela to prepare the city's defences against an imminent assault.[43] However, it appears that in Luanda Argüelles had his attention exclusively focused on the FNLA-Zairian forces concentrated at Morro do Cal, leading him to conclude optimistically to 'Furry' on 1 November that "[t]he MPLA still has the advantage, only ten days before independence", while "[t]he enemy, ill-prepared and dispirited, including the Zairian army units ... is giving us the breathing space to train the [FAPLA] battalions".[44] The unavoidable reality, however, was that the surprise South African invasion of southern Angola would rapidly put the MPLA's entire presence in Angola in jeopardy, and with it the fate of the 500-man Cuban mission who were supporting them.

Following the capture of Sá da Bandeira (Lubango) on 24 October, Zulu Force had spent a couple of days clearing the surrounding area of pockets of FAPLA resistance,[45] before setting out for Moçâmedes (Namibe) on 27 October. Zulu Force was split in two, Bravo taking the old road via Vila de Arriaga (Bibala) while Alpha took the main route through the Leba Gorge (using the famous zigzag road which had only recently been completed) to the point where the roads meet at Caraculo, an important station on the Moçâmedes-Serpa Pinto railway. Bravo encountered only light resistance, but Alpha ran into a strong FAPLA position just beyond Caraculo and fought into the night against it, inflicting heavy casualties. The following morning Bravo advanced past the wreckage of the previous night's battle on Moçâmedes itself,

[43] The FAPLA High Command also decided to abandon Matala & Quipungo (main towns on the railway line east of Sá da Bandeira) and Vila Branca (60 miles northeast of Cacula on the Huambo road) and instead concentrate its forces north of Cacula (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.23).
[44] Quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..
[45] On 26 October, Cmdt Breytenbach sent a company of Bravo under Cpt. Jack Dippenaar to capture Hoque (Viamba), a small settlement 25 miles east of Sá da Bandeira, just north of the vital junction between the road to Matala and Serpa Pinto (Menongue) and the road north to Benguela. After a heavy fight the FAPLA were driven off with many casualties, withdrawing to their main line of defence at Cacula. Breytenbach also sent another company under S. Sgt Costa Maurão back to João de Almeida (Chibia) to clear up pockets of FAPLA resistance, and over the next week he allegedly killed more than 150 FAPLA troops in the area. During the fighting two B-10 82mm recoilless guns were captured from the FAPLA and mounted in two captured Landrovers, significantly increasing Zulu Force's fire-power (Breytenbach, op. cit., pp.57-58).

encountering FAPLA resistance only at the southern edge of the town,[46] and that afternoon occupied the small port of Porto Alexandre (Tômbua) without resistance. The capture of Angola's southernmost commercial port temporarily eased the logistical constraints on Operation Savannah, and in addition delivered a huge amount of war booty into Zulu Force's hands, including hundreds of brand-new pick-up trucks and tractors. Encouraged by the continuing weak resistance offered by the FAPLA, the South African High Command immediately ordered Zulu Force to advance on Angola's principal commercial ports – Benguela and Lobito – and it was probably at this stage that it was decided to go the whole way to Luanda.[47] Unknown to the South Africans, however, they were about to encounter their first serious resistance, and following the capture of Moçâmedes the campaign would become more difficult and bloody for all concerned.

The South African strategy now involved an advance on two fronts simultaneously: Zulu Force would approach Benguela from the south while Foxbat would advance along the road from Nova Lisboa (Huambo) to Lobito, cutting off the retreat of the FAPLA forces defending Benguela. For this reason on 27 October Foxbat had captured Luimbale, a strategically vital town on the Alto Hama-Lobito road.[48] Three days later – after being reinforced with two new companies of troops (Charlie & Delta)[49] and several Eland-90 armoured cars – Zulu Force returned to Sá da Bandeira and headed northwards, Alpha running into the FAPLA's first line of defence at Cacula.[50] That night Alpha clashed with a FAPLA patrol coming south from

[46] This FAPLA force withdrew to the airport after half an hour of fighting where they were all killed or captured (Breytenbach, *op. cit.*, pp.60-61). Uys (op. cit., p.47) notes that seven FAPLA soldiers were killed and two wounded at Moçâmedes airport, although he curiously dates the battle a day earlier (on 27 October), as does Rey (op. cit., p.13).

[47] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.62) notes that "[t]he Brigadier arrived [in Moçâmedes] in fine fettle. The war was turning out to be a push over and the advance was far more rapid than expected".

[48] There are two main roads into the ports of Benguela and Lobito, an area best viewed as one large industrial sprawl. The southern approach from Catengue goes directly to Benguela, while the northeastern approach from Alto Hama (a crossroads 40 miles north of Huambo) goes directly to Lobito.

[49] In the end, Delta Company was left behind in Sá da Bandeira as a 'peace-keeping force' in the increasingly acrimonious atmosphere between the FNLA, UNITA and MPLA supporters.

[50] During this clash, the South Africans claim to have killed five FAPLA soldiers (Uys, op. cit., p.33). Among them was Comandante Graça, an Angolan whose loss was a severe blow to the defenders of Benguela as he was one of the few Angolans trained to use the Soviet artillery defending the town. Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.23) place the battle a day earlier, claiming that Zulu Force lost two

Quilengues (where Zulu Force expected to find the main body of resistance) and destroyed the leading Landrover, allegedly killing five FAPLA soldiers and a Cuban officer.[51] With South African forces advancing on them from two separate directions, the FAPLA-Cuban commanders now withdrew their main forces to Catengue and Norton de Matos (Caluita), hoping to cut off the double advance from the south (by Zulu Force) and the east (by Foxbat). Catengue is a vital junction on the Benguela railway line which controls the southern approaches to Benguela, and the South African commanders were quick to recognise that its capture would lay open the defences of Benguela, outflanking the FAPLA forces dug in at Norton de Matos and possibly even forcing the FAPLA to abandon Benguela altogether. Passing quickly through Quilengues (which the FAPLA had abandoned)[52] Zulu Force camped just south of Catengue on the night of 1 November, and the following day advanced to capture the town, fully expecting a hard fight.[53]

## The clash at Catengue, 2 November 1975

Advancing into Catengue on the morning of 2 November Zulu Force found the town strangely deserted, but it was alerted to the FAPLA's presence west of Catengue when a lone 122mm 'Katyusha' (BM-13) rocket landed near its position.[54] Charlie Company was dispatched under Captain Jack Dippenaar to investigate (another company was also sent east to search for any FAPLA presence), eventually stopping at a bridge over a dry river three miles from Catengue. As the South African force attempted to cross the dry riverbed, an entire FAPLA battalion of well-armed troops firmly dug-in on the hills beyond the bridge suddenly opened fire, quickly driving off

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armoured cars in the engagement (their first serious losses of the war), but South African sources make no reference to any losses.

[51] Uys, op. cit, p.33.

[52] In Quilengues, a local Afrikaaner informed them that a FAPLA force had occupied the bridge a few miles up the road, but it immediately retreated the moment Alpha's armoured cars arrived to investigate, leaving explosive charges on the bridge which failed to go off. Breytenbach (op. cit., p.68) puts the FAPLA's sudden flight down to Zulu Force's growing "reputation for unexpectedly fast movement and violent action" and adds that "many a FAPLA commander had his job cut out to keep his men in position the moment they heard that we were on our way".

[53] That morning one of the South African armoured cars destroyed a Sedan coming towards Catengue from the east, killing all of its occupants. On closer inspection they turned out to be senior FRELIMO officers who had been accompanying the FAPLA commanders as observers. Breytenbach (op. cit., p.69) dryly noted: "The war was getting more international by the day".

[54] The description of the battle on 2 November is taken from Breytenbach, op. cit., pp.69-79.

most of Charlie Company in a disorganised scramble towards Catengue. Facing a force of up to 1,000 soldiers backed by mortars and artillery, Charlie's commander tried to hold his ground with roughly forty men who had stayed behind, engaging in a noisy point-blank fire-fight with the massive FAPLA-Cuban force. As the first elements of Charlie Company stumbled into Catengue's outskirts, Cmdt Breytenbach realised his force was in serious trouble and he immediately rushed to the scene, calling up reinforcements which could respond to the overwhelming barrage being laid down by the FAPLA-Cuban artillery.[55] Fifty-one Cuban instructors from the Benguela CIR fought alongside their FAPLA allies during this battle, and their participation led Cmdt Breytenbach to conclude that his troops were "facing the best organised and heaviest FAPLA opposition to date, and we just had to win this one or Bravo troops would never fight again".[56]

Zulu Force slowly regrouped under continuous artillery fire, and Alpha was sent off westwards to set up an ambush on the FAPLA-Cubans' most likely withdrawal route. A staged assault was then launched on the FAPLA-Cuban positions on the hills overlooking the bridge, but due to the thickness of the vegetation several FAPLA trenches were missed and at one point Zulu Force's commander Cmdt Breytenbach (armed only with a rifle) was forced to fight off a FAPLA platoon which had been bypassed in the assault. During the battle the South African commanders found the bodies of Cuban instructors lying next to the recoilless guns and heavy machine-guns they had been operating, as well as documents and maps in Spanish which the Cuban commander had left behind in his retreat, confirming high-level Cuban participation in the battle.[57] Only after a third and final assault supported by tripod-mounted Vickers machine-guns was Zulu Force able to drive the FAPLA-Cubans off the hill, securing the position by 6pm that evening. Further havoc was then wreaked on the

[55] Breytenbach later estimated that the FAPLA-Cuban force had employed fifteen 82mm mortar batteries, a battery of 122mm 'Katyusha' rockets (mounted on vehicles), an assortment of 75mm & B-10 heavy guns, and dozens of heavy machine-guns. To reinforce his company, Breytenbach called in an 81mm mortar platoon from Sá da Bandeira and two armoured car troops with Vickers machine-guns from his own forces.

[56] Breytenbach, op. cit., p.72.

[57] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.82) accuses the Cuban commanders of leaving the battlefield first, "deserting their black FAPLA allies to our not so tender mercies", an accusation which was to be levelled at the Cubans on more than one occasion during their sixteen-year intervention in Angola, but one which was

FAPLA-Cuban force when it was ambushed by Alpha as it attempted to withdraw along the main road to Benguela, precipitating a disorderly rout.[58] The battle had lasted for nine hours without stop, and Zulu Force had suffered at least ten wounded, some of them seriously. At least ten FAPLA soldiers were killed in the fighting (the total may be ten times that figure), but the battle was more significant for involving the first officially-recognised Cuban fatalities in Angola. In total four Cubans were killed (including Captain Alberto Balsinde Arteagas), six were wounded and several were missing-in-action.[59]

The battle at Catengue was the first universally-accepted encounter between two of the main forces of intervention in Angola – the Cubans and the South Africans – and its effect was to throw the FAPLA-Cuban High Command in Luanda into panic. If South African accounts are to be believed, the FAPLA-Cuban troops had taken a heavy drubbing both at Catengue and during their retreat, and any hopes that they could hold out in Benguela were dashed the following day when Foxbat captured Norton de Matos (90 miles east of Lobito), threatening to cut off their only line of retreat.[60] The Cubans must have been shocked by the news of the deaths of at least half a dozen of their comrades (almost as many as had died during the entire eight-year mission in Guiné),[61] and they were quick to recognise that they would be next if the South African-backed forces were allowed to continue their relentless advance on Luanda. The Cuban mission in Angola thus found itself facing not one but two

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vehemently denied by the Cuban government. See 'The battle of Cangamba' in Chapter 8 for further discussion of this issue.

[58] Bravo passed the scene of the ambush three days later, its commander noting that: "Burnt out wrecks from trucks and cars were scattered around all over the place" (Breytenbach, op. cit., p.95).

[59] Figures from Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343). Risquet puzzlingly places the battle at Coporolo (35 miles south of Catengue), but he may be referring to the original ambush laid by the Cubans there which – according to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.24) – the South Africans deliberately avoided when advancing on Catengue. Both South African and Cuban descriptions of the battle on 2 November match up, and it appears that Risquet is referring to the same engagement as South African sources make no reference to any contact at Coporolo.

[60] The road north to Novo Redondo (Sumbe), Porto Amboim & Luanda begins 20 miles east of Lobito, and this vital T-junction was only 70 miles from the advancing South African forces at Norton de Matos (Caluita).

[61] Between 1966 and 1974, nine Cubans died in the Cuban mission to Guiné in support of the PAIGC (Gleijeses, 'The First Ambassadors', op. cit., p.74), the only comparable mission which had taken place up to that point. The Cuban military only admit four fatalities (and several MIA) by 3 November, but if one is to believe South African accounts, perhaps a dozen Cubans had been killed in separate incidents over the previous fortnight south of Rotunda (22 October), south of Quilengues (31 October) and at Catengue itself.

advances on Luanda – from the north by the FNLA-Zairian forces dug in at Morro do Cal which were on the verge of launching their final assault, and from the south by Zulu Force which was advancing on Luanda at the rate of 40 miles per day. And to make matters even worse, by early November the Cabinda enclave was under threat of invasion by a combined FLEC-Zairian force, threatening to cut off (and possibly annihilate) the 200-man Cuban force based there (see next chapter).

## The MPLA urgently request Cuban reinforcements, 3 November 1975

Thus by early November 1975 MMCA's mission objectives – to train a professional military force for use by the MPLA after independence – had been dramatically overtaken by events on the ground, and drastic measures would have to taken to avoid total military disaster. On 3 November 1975 the MPLA Politburo therefore met in emergency session and unanimously endorsed a proposal made by Neto, agreeing to send one of their most trusted comrades – 'Onambwe' (who had studied in Cuba during the early 1960s) – to Havana to request Cuban combat troops be sent immediately to Angola to shore up the MPLA against the FNLA-Zairian and South African advances.[62] The involvement of the Cuban commanders in this decision is not recorded, but it is highly likely that Argüelles and his colleagues supported (or possibly proposed) Neto's plan of action, anxious to save their men and the Cuban mission from an uncertain fate. The Cuban response was immediate, an emergency meeting of the Cuban Central Committee on 4 November unanimously agreeing to Neto's request within hours of receiving it (see below for the reasons behind the Cuban decision). All pretence of secrecy would now be abandoned as Cuba embarked on a military intervention in Africa on a scale unprecedented in the Revolution's previous sixteen years, and immediate instructions were issued to

[62] According to Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.18), Neto became so desperate in the early days of November 1975 that he proposed to the Soviet Union that he unilaterally declare independence before 11 November so that he could then openly request Soviet assistance as the head of a sovereign state (assistance they were clearly reluctant to give before independence was officially declared). Allegedly Neto taped an independence proclamation and it started to be played over Luanda radio at midnight on 5-6 November 1975, but was cut off the air after less than one sentence when news arrived that the Cubans had agreed to send in thousands of troops to shore up Luanda until Independence Day. No corroboration for this story has appeared elsewhere, however.

MMCA to arrange authorisation for Cuban aircraft bearing the first reinforcements to start landing at Luanda airport.[63]

Several writers have questioned the Cuban government's version of events, suggesting that the decision to intervene on a massive scale was taken some time before 4 November, possibly even before Zulu Force invaded southern Angola in mid-October 1975.[64] However, if one examines closely the tactical and strategic decisions taken by the Cuban commanders in the weeks leading up to 4 November, they are not those of officers in charge of several thousand Cuban troops. For if Argüelles really did have 1,500 Cuban troops at his disposal in mid-October 1975,[65] then his decision to shut down the Salazar CIR (thus weakening Luanda's eastern defences) in order to use its handful of Cuban instructors and raw recruits for an attack on Morro do Cal is nonsensical. Clearly there was an acute shortage of troops in Luanda, and MMCA was prepared to take any measures necessary to shore up the Angolan capital in the face of vastly superior FNLA-Zairian forces (which numbered at most 3,500 men). By the same token, the participation of only 51 Cuban military personnel at the vitally-important Catengue battle (upon which the entire defence of Benguela depended) seems absurd if there were up to 3,000 Cuban troops and over 50 tanks already in Angola (as some writers have claimed).[66] Clearly Cuba did not have thousands of combat troops in Angola in early November 1975 or they would have been used, although the possibility that the number of Cubans in Angola was slightly higher than the official figure of 500 is not outlandish.[67] Thus, once the FAPLA-Cuban commanders became fully aware of the new threat posed by Zulu Force in the

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[63] The Portuguese handed over control of Luanda airport to the MPLA around 6 November, the day before the first Cuban reinforcements left Havana by air for Luanda (Jorge Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343).

[64] For example, Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.112).

[65] Ratliff, op. cit., p.144.

[66] According to Legum & Hodges (op. cit., p.15), in late October 1,500-3,000 Cuban soldiers with 200 troop carriers, 50 tanks and mobile rocket launchers arrived in Brazzaville and were immediately transferred to Angola. This claim appears to be based on a UNITA statement made on 28 October 1975 (see Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.101).

[67] Various South African accounts mention clashes with Cubans in southern Angola from as early as 5 October, and given the repeated 'spottings' or evidence of Cuban personnel over the following month, it seems fair to conclude that between 50 and 100 Cuban military instructors/advisors may have been fighting alongside the MPLA from as early as August 1975. Even including these extra instructors in southern and central Angola, however, the entire Cuban force was still probably less than 1,000 men by early November 1975.

south, they realised that the forces at their disposal were too weak to repel a concerted attack on Luanda from both north and south, and as a last resort they called on Cuba to launch a massive military intervention to save them.

## Decision to launch Operation Carlota, 4 November 1975

The Cuban intervention in Angola was code-named 'Operación Carlota' after 'Black Carlota', the leader of the slave rebellion which broke out at the Triunvirato plantation (Matanzas) on 5 November 1843.[68] The imagery of a slave woman rising up to overthrow her racist oppressors – just as Cuban troops (many of them black) were about to take on the racist apartheid military machine – was particularly convenient for the Cuban regime which sought to depict the military intervention in Angola as a 'Second Liberation War', the oppressors this time being not the Portuguese but the racist 'Boers'. What the Cuban regime has subsequently chosen to ignore, however, is that this crucial decision only arose as a consequence of the gross incompetence of its Angolan strategy throughout 1974/75 – a strategy which had ended up placing a lightly-armed 500-man Cuban force in the path of two massive armies. Focused exclusively on the closing stages of 'Institutionalisation', the Cuban government had shown faltering interest in Neto's predicament throughout the first half of 1975, and when belatedly coaxed into getting involved in Angola in August, it had opted to send in an old-style military training mission (in many ways similar to the battalion sent to Brazzaville in 1965) with utterly impractical objectives. For by the time the bulk of Cuban instructors arrived in Angola in early October the country was already in a state of civil war, with FNLA-Zairian forces advancing on Luanda and generalized anarchy engulfing the countryside, not only making the Cuban mission to train the FAPLA over the next six months impossible but more importantly putting the Cuban force itself in considerable danger.

[68] The coincidence of the date of the slave rebellion's anniversary may have led García Márquez to conclude that the decision to launch the intervention was taken on 5 November (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.47), but both Gleijeses and Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343) are quite clear that the decision was taken the day before.

In the critical weeks leading up to 11 November the Cuban government quite simply took its eye off Angola, concentrating on internal matters whilst Argüelles' optimistic reports allayed any doubts it may have had about the MPLA's position in Angola. Thus when the stunning news arrived that the entire Cuban force was in danger of being wiped out, Fidel Castro was presented with the possibility of a humiliating military defeat at the hands of the international pariahs – South Africa – on the eve of what was planned to be his triumphal First Party Congress (which he was due to open on 17 December). The possibility that dozens (perhaps hundreds) of Cuban military personnel would be taken prisoner or killed by the South Africans – and that a virulently anti-Communist regime would take root in Angola – would have been a devastating blow to Castro's standing in the world, and would certainly have diminished his influence with his Soviet patron. Quite probably the Cuban leadership was privately shocked – possibly even outraged – by the alarming news, as only *three days* before Argüelles had optimistically reported to 'Furry' that the MPLA still had the military advantage against an 'ill-prepared and disorganised' enemy. Argüelles no doubt put this woefully-inaccurate appraisal of the situation down to a lack of intelligence on southern Angola, but his claims to have been unaware of the progress (or even existence) of Zulu Force strain credibility. After all, FAPLA personnel (who were in constant contact with Luanda) had been fighting the South Africans since 17 October and had been driven out of no fewer than three provincial capitals by Zulu Force, and MMCA would surely have been informed of this by any of the dozens of Cuban military instructors whom the South Africans encountered fighting alongside the FAPLA during October.

The simple truth was that the desperate situation facing the Cuban force in Angola on 4 November was entirely self-inflicted, and was the direct result of a Cuban operation which had been poorly-conceived, hastily-planned and incompetently handled both in Havana and Luanda. The Cuban government had sent a small military force into the middle of a brewing civil war and had clearly not even considered the possibility that the South Africans might invade, despite newspaper reports of numerous SADF incursions into southern Angola throughout late 1974 and 1975. Argüelles' first report to 'Furry' on 15 October is revealing of the disorganized nature of the

operation and the chaotic conditions under which it was set up. Complaining about the state in which many of the Cuban trucks had arrived in Angola, Argüelles moaned to his commander: "this is the largest operation we have ever undertaken and we are doing it in the worst conditions and circumstances. With little time for planning and with almost no knowledge of and experience in the country... we have had to improvise as we go along".[69] The limitations imposed by the situation in Angola were then compounded by almost total indifference from the leadership in Cuba as Independence Day approached, Havana failing to take note of Argüelles' decision to close the Salazar CIR only three days after it started functioning – which should have alerted them to the fact that the Cuban mission was already in serious trouble. Thus on 4 November the Cuban leadership (and principal among it Fidel & Raúl Castro) faced a potential military catastrophe of its own creation, for which there were only two possible solutions: immediate withdrawal to minimise the losses in personnel and equipment, or reinforcement on a massive scale to definitively crush the forces advancing on Luanda.

It is thus no surprise that the decision was immediate, for the Cuban government had no real choice. If the MPLA had been driven out of Luanda and forced to withdraw to Cabinda (as Neto was unwillingly suggesting at this point), it would have been a devastating blow to the MPLA's legitimacy in Africa, and would have put the Cubans in a hopelessly weak position to influence events in Angola. Furthermore, Castro had the additional consideration of his relationship with the Soviet Union whose influence over Cuba's economic and political future had grown enormously during the previous four years of Sovietization, threatening to eclipse Castro's role as unofficial spokesman of the Third World. It is thus quite possible that Castro saw an opportunity in Angola to restore his independence in international affairs which was simply too good to be missed. Although the Cuban regime subsequently went to great lengths to highlight the ethnic, historical and ideological reasons which motivated Cuban support for the MPLA (see Chapters 1 & 7), a close examination of events leading up to the launch of Operation Carlota demonstrates quite clearly that the decision to intervene on a massive scale was an example of pure political survival,

[69] Quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit..

and perhaps opportunism. Throughout his forty-year tenure as supreme leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro has proved nothing short of a genius in his opportunistic exploitation of situations as they have arisen – from his alliance with the Soviet Union to his recent manipulation of the Elián González case – and it is quite plausible that in November 1975 he saw the opportunity to turn the potential military disaster in Angola to his favour (just as he would thirteen years later at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale), and seize on the spectre of the MPLA's imminent collapse to stake a claim in one of the Cold War's hottest spots.

**The Soviet role in the decision to launch Operation Carlota**

The Soviet role in the decision to launch Operation Carlota is still extremely controversial, which is ironic as most evidence appears to show that they took very little part in it. Although it is quite possible that in August 1975 the Soviet military suggested to the MPLA that they ask Cuba for military instructors (the Soviets were extremely reluctant to send their own personnel at the time),[70] there is no evidence to suggest that they ordered Cuba to launch Operation Carlota in November. The Cuban government for its part has been quite insistent that the decision to send combat troops to Angola was a purely Cuban one, and that the Soviet Union was only informed about it after the operation was already under way.[71] "The Soviets knew absolutely nothing about it", Fidel Castro insisted recently. "We took the decision because of our long-standing relations over many years with Neto... We acted ... but without [Soviet] cooperation. Quite the opposite, in fact! There were criticisms, but we went ahead anyway".[72] This view may seem far-fetched, considering the state of Soviet-

[70] See Westad, op. cit..

[71] In 1989 Jorge Risquet insisted that "[it] was a sovereign decision made in response to a request for aid by Agostinho Neto. Not only was it our decision, we didn't even consult the Soviet Union. There was a communication – that is something different – to the Soviet Union, after our troops were on the way. We asked the Soviet Union for logistical aid for the troops. Our soldiers went with their own weapons, but they needed ammunition. They also needed more weapons as the war grew larger. We asked for, and received, extensive collaboration from the Soviet Union" (interview in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.16-17). According to Risquet, "Moscow has never told us what decisions to make".

[72] Author's translation of interview with Fidel Castro in 'Cold War', op. cit.. At a speech given on 17 April 1976, Castro declared that "Cuba alone bears the responsibility for taking the decision. The USSR had always helped the peoples of the Portuguese colonies in their struggle for independence, provided besieged Angola with basic aid in military equipment, and collaborated with us when imperialism had cut off practically all our air routes to Africa, but it never requested that a single Cuban be sent to that country. The USSR is extraordinarily respectful and careful in its relations with

Cuban relations at the time which were probably at their closest in the sixteen-year alliance, with every aspect of Cuban life – political, economic, military and social – being Sovietized under the supervision of thousands of Soviet technicians and military personnel. Nevertheless, there is convincing evidence which supports the view that the Soviet leadership was actually unaware of Operation Carlota until it was already underway.

Westad's interview with former Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Georgi Kornienko, is particularly revealing. Kornienko claims that the first he heard about the Cuban airlift to Angola was when he received a cable from the Soviet Ambassador to Conakry informing him that his Cuban counterpart had told him that Cuban troop 'planes would be refuelling in Conakry en route to Luanda. Having checked with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, KGB Chief Yuri Andropov and Defence Minister Marshal Andrei Grechko – none of whom had any knowledge of the operation – the matter was taken to the Politburo which allegedly opposed it. However, by the time a message was drafted and ready to send to Cuba, the aircraft were already in the air, and the Soviets begrudgingly agreed to go along with the operation.[73] Revealingly, Kornienko mentions that the Soviet technical personnel who assisted the Cuban troop airlift were under the impression that the entire operation had been authorised by the Kremlin, an interesting detail which suggests that the Soviet military (not for the first time) might have been working independently of the Kremlin on its own agenda. Throughout the 1970s the Soviet military (bankrolled by Siberian petrodollars) had been extending its influence across the world, and in 1975 it may have been keener than the Soviet leadership to escalate military involvement in Angola as a way of increasing the Soviet military's profile

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Cuba. A decision of that nature could only be made by our own party" (speech printed in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.71-72).

[73] Westad's interview with Georgi Kornienko, quoted in Westad, op. cit.. Certainly many in the CPSU Central Committee were unenthusiastic about getting involved in an indefinite military operation in Angola, one of them later commenting: "In Moscow [the news that the Cubans were sending troops] was greeted without enthusiasm. It was only when the Cubans had landed that we got involved. Because the Cubans kept asking us for help. They wanted weapons; they wanted food supplies. Once we started sending things to Angola, we were soon in over our heads – even though it wasn't in our plans to go there" (interview with Karen Brutents, former First Deputy Head of the CPSU Central Committee's International Department in 'Cold War', op. cit.). Former Soviet Ambassador to Washington DC Anatoly Dobrynin backs up this view, insisting that the Cubans sent their troops into Angola "on their own initiative and without consulting us" (quoted in Gleijeses, op. cit.).

and influence in the region. The Kremlin was clearly uneasy about upsetting superpower relations which were still – at least on paper – bound by the Nixon-Brezhnev policy of détente, and probably did not want these jeopardized over a region which up to this point had escaped all but the most superficial superpower interest.[74]

Significantly, throughout 1975 the Kremlin consistently vetoed the posting of Soviet personnel to Angola until after Independence Day (even the arrival of the first Soviet military advisors in Luanda on 12 November 1975 is disputed),[75] and it was only following the passing of the controversial Clark Amendment in the USA (19 December 1975) that the Soviet leadership was prepared to give Operation Carlota its full logistical support.[76] Certain gestures of solidarity were made by the Soviet Politburo during the operations' early days – such as the decision on 5 November to send Soviet naval units to patrol areas off the Angolan coast in support of the Cuban operation[77] – but they continued to hold back from becoming directly involved in the Angolan conflict until the fighting had clearly swung in the Cubans' favour (merely sending arms and a handful of weapons specialists to Brazzaville and Dar-es-Salaam). Only once the Cubans had inflicted a crushing defeat on the FNLA at Quifangondo and successfully detained the South African advance in southern Angola was the Soviet leadership persuaded to give the operation full Soviet backing, transforming the air- and sea-lift into one of the largest overseas military interventions in history (see below). Therefore, although it is possible that the Soviet military may have acted independently of the Kremlin in its dealings with the Cubans when the operation was initially launched (as it may later have done during the massive military campaigns in Cuando Cubango between 1985 and 1988), it is overwhelmingly likely that the Soviet

[74] Stockwell (op. cit., p.172) clearly supports this view, noting that "[a]fter the war we learned that Cuba had not been ordered into action by the Soviet Union. To the contrary, the Cuban leaders felt compelled to intervene for their own ideological reasons".
[75] Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.18) & LeoGrande (in Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.25) date their arrival on or about 12 November, but Gleijeses ('Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.) claims that he has seen Cuban documents that prove Soviet military personnel took almost no part in the strategic or tactical planning of the FAPLA-Cuban campaigns in Angola.
[76] Martin (op. cit., p.8) also notes that MPLA-Soviet relations had been strained for some time and that a decision to intervene with combat troops would have taken too long to authorize. "The Kremlin was notoriously ponderous in such matters [and the] MPLA and Cuban leaders would have been well aware of the fact that if Moscow was involved in the decision the probability was that there would have been no decision in time to save the MPLA in Luanda".
[77] Westad, op. cit..

leadership – though aware of the presence of a 500-man Cuban training mission in Angola since late August 1975 – was unaware of Operation Carlota until it was already well underway.[78]

## The launch of 'Operation Carlota'

Immediately following the Cuban Central Committee's decision to launch Operation Carlota, frenzied preparations started in Cuba to ship thousands of troops, arms and equipment to Luanda to shore up the FAPLA-Cuban forces defending the Angolan capital. Operation Carlota would need to have both short- and long-term objectives if it were to succeed. In the short-term, Cuba needed to fly as many reinforcements to Luanda as possible before it was overwhelmed either from the north by the FNLA or from the south by the South Africans, and this meant flying Cuban troops out immediately, an operation which was greatly constrained by Cuba's limited air transport capability. In the long-term, however, once Luanda had been secured Cuba would need to build up a significant military force – backed by heavy artillery, tanks and thousands of Cuban troops – which could then drive the enemy forces out of Angola and extend the MPLA's control over the entire country. This part of the operation – involving the transport of the bulk of the troops and heavy equipment – would be by sea, and would end up involving nearly all the available shipping in Cuba's merchant marine. The logistical difficulties of transporting a force which would eventually number over 30,000 men (plus equipment) nearly six thousand miles to Angola would strain the Cuban military to its limits, but the FAR's ability to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in its path ensured the success of Operation Carlota and made it one of the largest and most successful overseas military interventions in history.

The most pressing need on 4 November 1975 was the defence of Luanda which – given the (now proven) unreliability of Argüelles' appraisal of the situation on the ground – could fall at any moment. The FAPLA-Cuban commanders needed heavy

[78] Westad (op. cit.) recounts that on 5 November the Soviet Ambassador to Brazzaville suggested to his Cuban counterpart that Cuba should get more involved helping the MPLA, to which he replied that Cuba already had an artillery regiment fighting alongside the FAPLA in Luanda!

artillery to drive off a determined assault, and troops to bolster their forces in the event enemy forces broke through Luanda's first line of defence. To meet the first need, the Cuban military decided to use one of the FAR's newest weapons – the BM-21 missile-launcher. Capable of firing forty 122mm missiles in only twenty seconds up to a range of eight miles, the 'Stalin Organ' – as the BM-21 was nicknamed (presumably referring to its ability to annihilate all opposition) – was at the time the most advanced artillery system given to any Soviet ally, and had only seen combat briefly in the Middle East. The Cubans did not propose sending their own BM-21's – their military had after all only recently received its first units[79] – and besides Cuba had no means of transporting them by air (they would require heavy Soviet transport aircraft, such as the Il-76 or An-12, neither of which were available to the Cubans at this stage). Instead, the Cubans immediately sent twenty of their own most experienced artillery operators to Luanda whilst simultaneously ordering the Cuban ship La Plata (which had transported Cuban personnel to Pointe-Noire) to ferry six BM-21's which the MPLA had stockpiled there to Luanda.[80] Following their arrival on 7 November, the Cubans worked around the clock to ensure one set of batteries was ready for the vital battle at Quifangondo during which the BM-21's were to play a deciding role (see next chapter).

To meet the second need, Cuba ordered the immediate dispatch of a battalion of MININT Special Forces to bolster the forces defending Luanda. Specifically created for special operations anywhere in the world, the elite 628-man battalion was one of Cuba's most experienced and professional military units, many of the men having

[79] The FAR received its first BM-21's from the Soviet Union in 1974, and they were put under the control of the Chief of the Artillery Group, Gen. Álvaro López Miera (who later served with distinction in Angola). Although the FAR also had BM-24's and BM-30's in its possession, the BM-21's used in Angola were to prove by far the most effective weapon operated by the Cubans throughout the Angolan campaign (Báez, op. cit., p.37).

[80] Although the Soviets were apparently quite happy to provide the MPLA with one of their most advanced artillery systems, the Kremlin vetoed the dispatch of any Soviet personnel to train the FAPLA in the operation of the BM-21's, forcing to the MPLA to ask for Cuban assistance. Whether this was a deliberate policy designed to draw Cuba into Angola as a Soviet proxy force is difficult to determine, but what is without doubt is that in early November 1975 the Soviets were strongly opposed to intervening directly in Angola, and their surprise on hearing of the Cuban troop lift would tend to suggest that the escalation of Cuban involvement in Angola in early November was not part of some Soviet master-plan.

obtained doctorates in military or technical sciences.[81] Only cadres with the soundest political convictions were selected for the Special Forces, and their unbending loyalty to the Cuban regime may have been one of the reasons they were chosen to spearhead the military intervention (although the short preparation time they required before leaving for Luanda [two days] was clearly a factor). The problem was how to transport this battalion to Luanda using Cuba's out-dated air fleet, as the only aircraft in the DAAFAR (Cuban Air Force) suitable for transporting military personnel – several ageing Bristol Britannias – would be unable to make the six thousand mile journey non-stop. Each additional soldier or artillery piece would further reduce the aircraft's range and speed, presenting the Cuban logistics planners with irreconcilable priorities for an airlift which needed to be both rapid *and* on a massive scale. In the end the Cubans opted for a route previously used by many of the Cuban instructors travelling to Cabinda, which involved three refuelling stops in Barbados, Bissau and Brazzaville – a gruelling 48-hour journey but the best improvised solution available at the time. The choice of Barbados for the first re-fuelling stop would turn out to be controversial, however, and would lead to fierce diplomatic manoeuvring by the American government over the following four months as it struggled to deny Cuba the landing rights it needed for the airlift to continue, inspiring original and often desperate alternatives (see next chapter).

To meet Operation Carlota's long-term objectives, thousands of Cubans were called up by their local Military Committees to make up the bulk of the intervention force. Although the commanding officers were all professional soldiers, the majority of the ground troops were made up of reservists, some of them carrying out their national service.[82] As on previous internationalist missions all personnel were strictly volunteers, and there is ample evidence to suggest that the proposed operation was extremely popular. Indeed, García Márquez notes that once news leaked out that thousands of volunteers were needed for an internationalist mission, "[a] great deal of

[81] Most sources quote the battalion's size as 650 men (for example, García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.47), but Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343) puts the exact number at 628. Many of these officers had over fifteen years experience in the FAR, and several had fought with distinction at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961.

[82] See Chapter 7 for full discussion of selection procedure and experience of Cuban internationalists serving in Angola.

effort was required to prevent the conversion of this massive solicitude into a state of national disorder".[83] Simultaneously all available passenger and cargo ships in the Cuban merchant marine were hastily modified to take the bulk of this massive military force to Angola, the first three ships bearing a total of 1,200 men with arms and equipment sailing from Havana on 8 November.[84] The FAR was fortunate to be able to draw on previous experience when preparing the sealift, having already carried out four major military operations in the previous decade which involved transporting large numbers of Cuban military personnel and equipment by sea.[85] These troops would not be reinforcements for Luanda, however, as the first of them would not arrive there until 27 November – over two weeks after the pivotal battle of Quifangondo (the average crossing from Havana to Luanda took twenty days). They were in effect a reserve force to be used in the counter-offensive which would be launched once Luanda had been secured, and the very fact that Cuba was forced to improvise to such an extent with outdated or unsuitable ships and aircraft is in itself strong proof of the lack of Soviet support for the troop-lift during Operation Carlota's early stages. This would change once the tide of battle started to turn in the Cubans' favour in late November.

[83] Most units were summoned by telegram to their local Comité Militar, but many turned up unsolicited (having heard about the call-up from friends in the FAR). The selection procedure was similar to that used on previous internationalist missions, the reservist's physical, moral and political record all being taken into account. So desperate were some Cubans to go that they allegedly falsified their qualifications, although for some this ironically meant downgrading them: one qualified engineer claimed to be a truck driver while another high official in the PCC pretended to be a mechanic. García Márquez also notes the story of one young man who went without his father's permission "only to meet him later in Angola, since he too had gone without telling his family". Interestingly, the few who refused to go "were exposed to all kinds of public scorn and private contempt", something official Cuban accounts fail to mention (García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.49-50).

[84] Cuba's only two passenger ships were hastily modified to take as many troops as possible, all available free space on board being converted into sleeping accommodation, tripling the ships' normal passenger capacity. Similarly, cargo ships which normally transported eighty crew managed to squeeze over a thousand passengers on board, along with their arms, ammunition and armour (García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.52).

[85] These operations were to Algeria (October 1963), Brazzaville (August 1965 to July 1967), Guiné (June 1966 to 1974) and Syria (October 1973).

# Chapter 5

## The 'Second Liberation War'

## November 1975 – March 1976

Just after 10pm on 8 November 1975, two Britannias bearing the first 164 men of the MININT Special Forces battalion landed in Luanda, formally initiating Operation Carlota.[1] Their arrival came not a moment too soon, for on all three fronts – Quifangondo, Cabinda and southern Angola – the situation had become critical for the FAPLA-Cuban forces. That very morning not only had a combined FNLA-Zairian force launched a third assault against Quifangondo, but reports were coming in that a large FLEC-Zairian force had simultaneously invaded Cabinda, threatening to wipe out the stranded FAPLA-Cuban force defending Cabinda city. Zulu Force had by this stage captured Benguela and Lobito (see below), and by 9 November the South Africans were rapidly advancing northwards towards Novo Redondo (Sumbe), the provincial capital of Cuanza Sul. Thus if ever there was a moment when the entire Cuban operation in Angola hung in the balance, it was on 8 November, as the FAPLA-Cuban commanders braced themselves for a combined assault on three separate fronts by three different foreign armies. Over the following week – from 8 to 14 November – crucial battles would be fought on all three fronts which would determine the final outcome of the bitter fourteen-year struggle between the MPLA and FNLA in Angola. Although the events on each of these fronts occurred more or less simultaneously, for ease of analysis I have chosen to examine each front separately.

[1] Gleijeses states there were 158 Cubans aboard both aircraft (Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.), but both García Márquez (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.48) and Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.343) maintain there were 82 men aboard each aircraft, making a total of 164. The fact that each plane bore the same number of troops as the Granma nineteen years previously may not have been a coincidence. There is some disagreement over how long it took the 650-man battalion to arrive in Luanda: Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.103) states they had arrived by the end of the week, García Márquez (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.47) that the entire airlift took 13 days, while Jorge Risquet (op. cit.) states that the last units arrived 'around 28 November'.

## The battle for Cabinda, 8-13 November 1975

The invasion of Cabinda launched by a mixed FLEC-Zairian-mercenary force on 8 November 1975 came as no surprise to the Cuban commander, Ramón Espinosa Martín, who had spent the previous month preparing the enclave's defences.[2] By early November his 200 Cuban instructors had nearly completed the formation of the FAPLA's 1st Infantry Battalion, and they were about to start work on the 2nd Battalion whose recruits had been assembled at Dinge and Lândana (Cacongo) for training.[3] Painfully aware that the forces at his disposal were too weak to repel a sustained FLEC-Zairian assault, Espinosa was outraged when Argüelles ordered him to send his most experienced mortar and anti-aircraft instructors to reinforce Luanda's fledgling defences at Quifangondo. Espinosa refused point-blank, insisting that if he let those men go he would seriously endanger the defence of Cabinda, and this prompted a visit by Argüelles in person to enforce the order.[4] Inevitably Espinosa acquiesced to his superior, but only after Argüelles had promised that Espinosa would get his men back once the assaults on Luanda had been repelled.[5] In the event, however, the most serious fighting in Cabinda and at Quifangondo occurred simultaneously, forcing Espinosa to mount a defence of the enclave with only one full battalion of FAPLA

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[2] My account of the fighting in Cabinda has been pieced together from conflicting and often extremely confusing accounts by the Cuban commander, Div.-Gen. Ramón Espinosa Martín (in Báez, op. cit., pp.452-459), an authorised account by Cuban journalist José M. Ortiz (Angola: un abril como Girón, Editora Política, Havana, 1979, pp.31-39) and MINFAR's official history of the war (Rey, La Guerra de Angola, op. cit., pp.25-41). The poorly-drawn maps in the latter two accounts have greatly hampered the work of reconstructing the battles.

[3] The FAPLA recruits were given a rapid course in the use of the varied Soviet bloc weaponry they had been issued with, as well as in the sort of weapons the Cubans expected the FLEC-Zairian force to be using. Tactical training focused on reconnaissance, guerrilla war tactics and ambush-laying, as well as the laying and defusing of mines (which was to prove particularly useful during the fighting). The FAPLA recruits were also given basic ideological instruction, including the MPLA's version of Angolan history, a profile of its enemies and an outline of its main ideological beliefs (nationalism, anti-imperialism and possibly even Marxist-Leninism).

[4] Argüelles was accompanied on his visit by Víctor Schueg Colás & Colonel Armando Saucedo. Espinosa gives no date for this visit (in Báez, op. cit., p.456), but it was probably made shortly after 21 October when the Salazar CIR was shut down and Luanda's defences were re-organised at Quifangondo.

[5] The arrival of 500 FAPLA recruits in Cabinda on 2 November 1975 (Ortiz, op. cit., p.33) may have been intended to make up for this shortfall. They were transported (in three trips) by launch from Benguela, a move which seriously weakened the port's defences only three days before Zulu Force launched its final assault. The decision to send them to Cabinda was either an example of wanton incompetence on the part of the FAPLA-Cuban commanders in Benguela, or perhaps reflected an acceptance on their part that Benguela could not withstand a South African assault and that the 500 FAPLA recruits would only have been captured or killed in such an event.

(the second battalion had received almost no training at all), a handful of experienced FAPLA guerrillas, five assorted artillery batteries and the reduced contingent of Cuban instructors (a total of around 600 troops).[6]

The challenge for Espinosa would be to ensure that the limited forces at his disposal successfully defended the capital – Cabinda city – from a land invasion expected to involve up to five infantry battalions (at least 1,500 men), with possible aerial or naval landings anywhere along the coast near the city.[7] Reasoning that the invasion force would opt for the simplest (and quickest) route – crossing the border at Iema and taking the main road 15 miles north to Cabinda city – Espinosa decided to place his main defences at N'to (Buca), roughly a third of the way along that road (see map). The FAPLA 1st Battalion was ordered to dig in there in two lines of defence, with an assortment of anti-tank weapons, mortars and AA guns in support.[8] To guard against possible secondary attacks along the eastern border with Zaire – which Espinosa reckoned would converge on Subantando (Baca, 15 miles east of Cabinda city) and from there take the road directly west to Cabinda city itself – over 500 mines were laid throughout the eastern border area with Zaire during the two nights preceding the invasion, while small platoons of experienced FAPLA guerrillas were positioned along the border to detect and if possible halt any invading forces. The 2nd FAPLA battalion was held in reserve at Dinge (where they received a crash-course in basic military training) with orders to concentrate in Subantando in case of an emergency, from where they could send a company to reinforce the FAPLA guerrillas defending the eastern border with Zaire if necessary.[9] And finally, in Lândana (Cacongo) a strong FAPLA force supported by anti-tank and AA guns was posted in the old

[6] The FAPLA-Cubans had the following artillery at their disposal: two 120mm mortar batteries, two 14.5mm AA batteries (or 'cuatro bocas' ['four mouths'], so named because of the weapon's distinctive four gun barrels) & one 122mm gun battery.

[7] According to Espinosa (in Báez, op. cit., p.457), Castro had predicted the attack would occur any time between 8 and 11 November, reasoning that the FLEC-Zairian forces would want to be in control of Cabinda city by Independence Day.

[8] Two companies were placed in the first line of defence, reinforced with 75mm recoilless guns & B-10 guns. One company defended Labe on the right flank (the anticipated direction of the attack), with a single platoon defending the left flank at a place denominated 'Punto 1', and a third company of the 1st Battalion occupying the second line of defence behind N'to. The entire battalion was supported by one battery of 120mm mortars, one of 14.5mm AA guns and one of 122mm guns.

[9] The 2nd FAPLA Battalion would nevertheless leave behind one company at Dinge to mount ambushes against any possible invasion from the north, from Buco Zau, Inhuca or Beira-a-Nova.

Portuguese base to defend Cabinda city against a possible amphibious assault,[10] which was expected to occur somewhere south of Cabinda city.[11]

Espinosa had tried with his limited forces to anticipate all possible assault strategies, and when the FLEC-Zairian invasion finally came on the morning of 8 November 1975, his tactical decisions were shown to have been wise. The invading army was reportedly made up of four infantry battalions – three FLEC and one Zairian (reputedly Mobutu's elite 'Karmanyola' regiment) – under the command of about 150 French and American mercenaries, and totalled nearly 2,000 troops. Espinosa had correctly guessed their plan of attack, but had not anticipated that the FLEC-Zairian commander – allegedly an American mercenary who was later killed in the fighting – had planned for all three fronts to converge on Cabinda city simultaneously. As a result of this strategy, the first attack did not come from the south as expected but from the east (around Chingundo and Chimbuande), its objective being to capture Subantando before the main force (supported by an amphibious landing) invaded Cabinda from the south. Espinosa thus found himself in the wrong place when the invasion began – having set up his principal command post alongside the main FAPLA-Cuban force at N'to – and he immediately ordered it to be moved to Subantando to be closer to the battle, leaving Comandante Vásquez in command of the fledgling 2nd FAPLA Battalion and other units in Dinge and Lândana, with orders to follow the previously-arranged defence plan.

Initially the fighting did not go well for the FAPLA-Cubans, however. The small groups of FAPLA-Cuban guerrillas patrolling the border area were quickly driven back almost as far as Subantando by the two leading FLEC battalions (one FAPLA platoon was wiped out), prompting Espinosa to send in a company of reinforcements from the 1st FAPLA battalion under Captain Cruz.[12] That night they were ambushed near the Lulando river (west of Chimbuande) and three FAPLA soldiers were killed,

[10] The Portuguese garrison had withdrawn from Cabinda on 5 November 1975, nearly a week earlier than expected. This move subsequently drew Cuban criticism (see Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit.).
[11] In addition to the preparations mentioned, extensive mine-fields were laid along all feasible invasion routes, and small groups of FAPLA guerrillas were sent to patrol different sections of the Cabinda-Zaire border.
[12] The company was supported by a platoon of 120mm mortars and another of 14.5mm artillery.

precipitating a disorderly retreat during which three mortars were left behind in an abandoned truck (they were later recovered). The Cuban commanders nevertheless managed to rally their troops and they dug in east of Subantando, laying extensive minefields around their positions while Captain Cruz set up an ambush on the road from Tando Zinze (Lucula) in case FLEC units attempted to assault Subantando from the north. The next morning several patrols were sent out to locate the FLEC-Zairian force, and one was eventually ambushed as it emerged from thick forest near the villages of Talicuma and Talibeca (three miles east of Subantando). The FAPLA-Cuban soldiers did not disintegrate as a fighting force this time, however, and withdrew in good order to dig trenches 200 yards from Talicuma, thus halting the FLEC-Zairian advance.[13] It was at this point that, in the words of Espinosa, "the initiative passed to our side".[14] Heavy fighting continued throughout the day around Talicuma and Subantando, but the FLEC-Zairian troops were unable to break through the determined Cuban-FAPLA resistance, and that night Cuban sappers laid further minefields around Subantando to prevent any night-time infiltration.[15] The enemy advance had effectively been halted, and during heavy fighting the next day they would fruitlessly attempt to break through the main Cuban-FAPLA line of defence, suffering further casualties in the process.

That same day Espinosa's focus switched back to N'to where the main FLEC-Zairian force crossed the border into Cabinda, intending to capture Cabinda city by the end of the day. The Cubans were alerted to the presence of an approaching enemy column by a FAPLA-Cuban patrol which clashed with its leading elements the previous night, and that morning (10 November) a further patrol ran into its forward elements (a troop of Zairian armoured cars) a mile inside Cabinda as they advanced towards N'to. Possibly emboldened by the weak resistance they had so far encountered – having easily driven off a couple of platoons of FAPLA guerrillas as they moved towards N'to – the FLEC-Zairian soldiers marched confidently (some might say complacently) into the N'to valley, some of them allegedly singing as they advanced.

[13] During the day they were reinforced first by two 'cuatro bocas', then by 82 mm and 120 mm guns.
[14] Author's translation from Rey, op. cit., p.32.
[15] According to Espinosa, the FLEC battalion commander – a captain in the Zairian army with whom Espinosa had had a beer at the Cabinda-Zaire border post several weeks before while on reconnaissance – was killed during this heavy fighting, greatly demoralising his troops.

It was a scene which was to be repeated later that day 230 miles to the south at Quifangondo, as an over-confident mixed Zairian-Angolan force advanced over open ground towards well-defended positions, appearing to the FAPLA-Cuban defenders 'like a parade ground drill'.[16] Once they were within range the FAPLA-Cubans opened fire with 120 mm & 82 mm mortars, 122 mm guns and 'cuatro bocas' (14.5 mm guns), taking the invaders completely by surprise and inflicting devastating casualties. Their advance quickly disintegrated into a disorderly rout, and they retreated towards the border leaving "more than a hundred bodies covering the valley entrance to N'to".[17]

Espinosa was at Subantando when he heard the start of the enemy's preliminary bombardment, and as he raced back to N'to he was informed by the FAPLA Chief of Staff Bolongó that yet another FLEC force – this time in launches – was attempting an amphibious landing near Labe (just south of Cabinda city). Anxious to get to N'to where the main battle was about to start, Espinosa quickly took a detour to Base Chica (a promontory overlooking the proposed landing site) where a solitary GRAD-1P battery had been set up.[18] Several launches loaded with troops were already visible off the coast, and with no time to wait for them to come into range Espinosa calculated the elevation angles, correctly set the rocket-launcher for its first shot, and was then forced to leave the Angolan battery commander (who had had little experience operating the weapon) to open fire at the right moment.[19] Ultimately luck was with the Cubans that day, for the first shot ended up hitting the leading launch, and the demoralising effect of the rocket barrage soon drove off the remaining launches before they had reached the shore.[20] Returning to N'to Espinosa arrived just in time for a second more determined assault by the main FLEC-Zairian invasion force against the defences' right flank at Labe (possibly in support of the amphibious

[16] Author's translation of Espinosa in Báez, op. cit., p.458.
[17] Author's translation from Rey, op. cit., p.36.
[18] The GRAD-1P was a fairly primitive Soviet rocket-launcher which was eventually replaced by the more effective BM-13 ('Katyusha') and BM-21. The Angolans nick-named it the 'monocaxitos'.
[19] Espinosa must clearly have been uneasy about leaving a poorly-qualified battery commander in charge of repelling the amphibious invasion force, and before returning to N'to he stopped off at Cabinda airport where he ordered a FAPLA infantry platoon and a Cuban 'cuatro bocas' battery to go to Labe to cut off a possible enemy advance if they managed to land.

landings). But in a repeat of the morning's debacle, sustained Cuban machine-gun and artillery fire – in particular from the 'cuatro bocas' which were proving devastatingly effective against infantry – ensured the attackers never got more than fifty yards from the Cuban trenches, and they were eventually driven off with significant casualties. "The image they offered was one of absolute defeat", Espinosa wrote later.[21]

Having defeated the two western invasion forces, Espinosa then turned his attention back to the east where the two FLEC-Zairian battalions which had spearheaded the invasion were still attempting to capture Subantando. Heavy fighting had raged in this area throughout 10 and 11 November,[22] but the FLEC-Zairian forces had been unable to break through the defences, and when on the second day their commander (an American mercenary) was killed in the fighting, their attacks faltered.[23] Sensing victory, Espinosa ordered an immediate counter-attack, and at dawn on 12 November the FAPLA-Cuban forces advanced eastwards from Subantando, sweeping the disintegrating FLEC-Zairian forces back towards the border with Zaire. As they advanced, Cuban troops claim to have found evidence of atrocities committed by the retreating invaders, including a massacre of civilians at the village of Talibeca.[24] When they reached the border at 3pm on 13 November the invasion of Cabinda was effectively over (although sporadic fighting with FLEC in Cabinda would continue for decades) and the first serious threat to the MPLA's survival had been removed.

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[20] Espinosa (in Báez, op. cit., p.458) puts the flight of the amphibious force down to heavy machine-gun fire, although the official Cuban version chooses to emphasise the FAPLA commander's heroic role in the battle.

[21] Author's translation from Rey, op. cit. p.38. The FAPLA-Cuban troops also noted Zairian helicopters flying out what they supposed were the more important casualties (and bodies) shortly after the attack, a common occurrence among all the foreign-manned military forces which fought in the Angolan War.

[22] During the withdrawal on 8 November two Cuban lieutenants – Martínez & Jardines – had been left behind, so during the fighting on 10 November Lieut. Gómez led a platoon (supported by 120mm mortars) to search for them. The platoon quickly ran into an enemy patrol and had to retreat so fast that Gómez was forced to set the mortars at maximum elevation, bringing the shells down only yards from his own position (and thus stopping the enemy's advance). A second search party located the missing Cuban officers later that day.

[23] Ortiz (op. cit., p.39) claims that the American mercenary commander of the invasion was killed when his retreating forces accidentally stumbled into a Cuban mine-field, whereas Espinosa (in Báez, op. cit., p.459) maintains the American was killed leading an assault on FAPLA-Cuban positions east of Talicuma.

[24] According to Espinosa (in Báez, op. cit., p.38), the local Cabindans still refer to Talibeca as the 'village of the dead' after the massacre perpetrated there.

The FLEC-Zairian force had suffered up to 600 casualties in the invasion – including two of its own commanders – while FAPLA-Cuban casualties probably did not exceed 30 killed and perhaps 50 wounded.[25]

The Cuban commanders had shown remarkable cool-headedness against what was in effect a simultaneous invasion from three different directions (from the east, the south and west [the amphibious landing]), and had succeeded in defending the vitally-important enclave without any extra help from Luanda. At one stage fighting battles on all three fronts simultaneously, Espinosa had used the limited forces at his disposal to great effect, and (perhaps unwittingly) had in five days' fighting secured the MPLA's future economic lifeline – Cabinda oil – which has kept the MPLA in power to this day. But Espinosa would have to wait some time for his actions to receive official recognition, and his rapid replacement as Chief of the Cabinda military mission by General Joaquín Quintas Solá (on 11 December 1975) may have reflected his superiors' displeasure at his earlier refusal to comply with Argüelles' orders. While Espinosa had been occupied fighting off the FLEC-Zairian invasion, however, FNLA-Zairian forces had launched their final assault on Luanda, and the ensuing battle at Quifangondo would prove far more crucial, deciding once and for all the outcome of the MPLA's fourteen-year struggle for supremacy against the FNLA in Angola.

**Build-up to the battle of Quifangondo, early November 1975**

By the time the MPLA's Central Committee voted to request a Cuban military intervention on 4 November 1975, the FNLA's final assault on Luanda was known to be imminent.[26] For the past two weeks Roberto's forces had been concentrating at Caxito and Morro do Cal, and with less than a week till independence was due to be

[25] Ortiz (op. cit., p.39) estimates the FLEC-Zairian casualties at 600 for the entire invasion, 250 of those during the last day's fighting. No FLEC or Zairian source has come to light to contradict this estimate. FAPLA-Cuban casualty figures are not mentioned in any Angolan or Cuban accounts, so the figure given is my best estimate.

[26] My account of the battles of Quifangondo is based on Rey (op. cit., pp.43-56), Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., pp.17-19), Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., pp.343-344), Steenkamp (op. cit., pp.48-53), Stockwell (op. cit., pp.213-215) & my own interview with Holden Roberto (27 & 29 May 1998, Luanda).

declared MMCA's attention was focused exclusively on defeating this most pressing threat to Luanda. The FAPLA-Cuban commanders knew that Roberto would want to have the Angolan capital under his control by 11 November, and to achieve this in the week remaining to him the only viable approach was through Quifangondo. There was simply no other way into Luanda from the north, the only alternative involving a 500-mile detour via Carmona (Uíge), Salazar (N'Dalatando) and Dondo, a journey which could take his forces up to three months to complete.[27] Holden Roberto – just like his principal rival Agostinho Neto – believed that if his troops were not in control of Luanda when independence was formally granted by the Portuguese, his future government would lack the international legitimacy it needed to secure massive military and economic aid from the West to rebuild Angola (and to secure his grip on power). Thus he believed it was vital to take the capital before 11 November, and his stubborn determination to do so regardless of the risk would not only precipitate a military disaster for the FNLA, but would ultimately cost him the leadership of Angola.

Crucially for the FNLA, Roberto had failed to appreciate just how formidable the FAPLA-Cuban defences at Quifangondo had become by 4 November (even before the timely arrival of the BM-21 missile-launchers), and this was due as much to Quifangondo's strategic location as it was to Cuban ingenuity. The hills of Quifangondo dominate the northern approaches to Angola, and directly overlook the point at which the road from Cacuaco (a beach resort on the northern outskirts of Luanda) splits in two, one road following the river Bengo east towards Funda, while the other continues northwards through Morro do Cal towards Caxito (see map). To the west of this vitally-strategic road is the Atlantic Ocean, and to the east is the Panguila Lagoon, a swampy area unsuitable for any sort of vehicle and (rumour had it) infested with poisonous snakes. Thus the only viable option for an attacking force was to march directly down the main road from Morro do Cal – across several miles of open ground – and pass directly underneath Quifangondo before heading south into Luanda's northern outskirts, affording the FAPLA-Cuban defenders a vast and

[27] Quifangondo overlooked the only other road north of Luanda which linked the beach resort at Cacuaco with the principal south-eastern approach road to Luanda (at Catete), and as such was of no use to the FNLA-Zairian forces.

unobstructed field of fire. Cuban engineers had been careful to construct a complex series of underground bunkers in which the defenders could take shelter during the inevitably heavy bombardment which would precede such an attack, enabling them to start any serious confrontation (almost) unscathed.

The FNLA-Zairian commanders must have got some inkling of the strength of these new defences when they finally launched a second, exploratory attack on Quifangondo on 5 November.[28] The Cuban commanders knew by this stage that reinforcements would soon be on their way (only the night before Cuba had decided to launch Operation Carlota), but until the first of these arrived – in three days at the earliest – they were effectively on their own. Despite having lost their 200 Katangese allies shortly after the 23 October battles (they had been sent to defend Benguela), MMCA nevertheless managed to field just over a thousand troops, backed by an assortment of mortars, heavy machine-guns and light artillery.[29] When the five armoured cars leading the FNLA-Zairian attack were within range, the defenders opened up with a lethal barrage of artillery, rockets and mortars, driving off all attempts by the attacking troops to advance on their positions. Eventually around 2pm the attackers were forced to withdraw, allegedly having suffered heavy casualties (there were no FAPLA-Cuban casualties that day). Encouraged by their improved performance, the defenders of Quifangondo were able to drive off a further attack (or possibly no more than a raid) on their positions on 8 November, and that night they received a further morale boost with the arrival in Luanda of the first 164 Cuban reinforcements from the MININT Special Forces battalion.[30]

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[28] Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.344) dates the battle on 6 November, whereas Rey (op. cit., p.46) places it a day earlier, a date which seems to correlate better with accounts of the time.

[29] The original 1,094-man force would have been reduced to around 900 by the departure of the Katangese, and to this was added another under-strength FAPLA Battalion (lacking two companies, therefore c.120 men) under ten Cuban officers (who had fought at Quiangombe and Samba-Caju in late October), one 76mm gun operated by four Cuban officers sent from Guinea, and eight more Cuban officers from MMCA's headquarters, making a rough total of 1,040 men.

[30] These Cubans were travelling in civilian clothes with tourist passports, and carried machine-guns in their suitcases, while an assortment of light artillery – including three 75mm recoilless guns and three 82mm guns – was stored in the hold.

These MININT troops were not only exhausted by their forty-eight-hour trip (including a gruelling stop-over in Bissau),[31] but by this stage many of them were convinced that the defence of Luanda was doomed, and their commanders fully expected that within hours of landing they might be taking part in a rapid evacuation to Cabinda.[32] However, on arrival in Luanda they were heartened by the news that no less than three assaults on Quifangondo had been repulsed, and they immediately changed out of their civilian clothing into the FAR's distinctive olive-green uniform and marched up to Cacuaco where – due to their understandable physical exhaustion – they were placed in the second line of defence as a reserve. Far more significant than the arrival of the first elements of the MININT battalion, however, was the appearance of the first working BM-21 missile-launcher which arrived at Quifangondo during the night of 9/10 November. Since 7 November a team of twenty Cuban specialists had been working to get the first of six BM-21 units shipped from Pointe-Noire operational, but they had almost immediately encountered a serious problem. Due to an oversight the Soviets had forgotten to send several fuses which were vital for the weapons' operation, and realising that it could take weeks to get replacements from the Soviet Union (which was painfully slow in its weapons deliveries), the Cubans urgently requested the fuses from Havana. Luckily the FAR had several in Havana and they were immediately flown over, arriving just as the BM-21 units were about to take up positions at Quifangondo. Ironically, this nail-biting delay may have been to the Cubans' advantage, for it enabled them to position the BM-21 units only hours before the battle started, thus ensuring that the missile-launcher's first combat use in Africa would take the enemy completely by surprise.

It was at this stage (9 November) – with only 24 hours to go until the Portuguese High Commissioner officially granted Angola independence – that Holden Roberto decided to launch his final assault on Luanda, although there is still some dispute over his motivations for taking this decision. Most writers have blamed the debacle which

[31] The first MININT contingent was forced to wait for five hours in Bissau during which the exhausted Cubans tried to get some sleep in the airport sheds, but there were so many mosquitoes that by the time they left their sheets were soaked with blood (García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.48).
[32] García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.48 & 53.

followed solely on Roberto's arrogance and refusal to listen to anyone else's advice.[33] Indeed the SADF liaison officer appointed to advise Roberto – Brig. Ben Roos – claims that he strongly advised Roberto against the attack, a warning which was repeated by Major-Gen. Constand Viljoen and Gen. Magnus Malan (Chief of the SADF) who visited Roberto at Ambriz on 4 November. In their opinion the terrain was unsuitable for a frontal attack, and privately they harboured grave reservations about the ability of Roberto's poorly-disciplined troops to mount a co-ordinated attack against determined defenders.[34] Roberto would better serve the FNLA's interests – they argued – by withdrawing to his core regions of support and retrenching there, saving his military strength for another day.[35] Roberto, however, tells a different story, claiming that Viljoen and Malan asked him to call off his attack on 8 November only because the SADF was going to send five battalions of its own commandos – 3,000 men in total – to capture Luanda themselves. The following day, however, the offer was withdrawn,[36] leaving Roberto in a dilemma: either he could ignore the South Africans' advice and go ahead with the attack on the off-chance that it was successful, or he could withdraw and lose a crucial opportunity to crush the MPLA

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[33] In Steenkamp's words (op. cit., p.48): "Unlike Savimbi, who accepted that he lacked expertise as a field commander and relied on his South African advisers' professional knowledge, Roberto insisted on going his own way". Hallet's criticism of Roberto is even less sympathetic (op. cit., p.376): "Roberto was dreaming of a spectacular march into Luanda. Without bothering to make use of the services of South African instructors, without troubling to equip his troops with the weapons being flown in by the CIA, without heeding the tactical advice of highly experienced Portuguese officers accompanying the FNLA column, Roberto launched his men in an assault on a position manned by well-equipped Cubans. The attack was a total disaster".

[34] Steenkamp (op. cit., pp.48-49) elaborates their thinking thus: "Roberto's forces were hardly top-of-the-line. In addition to his horde of partly-trained and mostly completely unsophisticated Bakongo tribesmen, he had about 120 white Portuguese mercenaries, his contingent of faint-hearted Zairians and a few resident advisers, among them [Brig.] Roos and a small CIA contingent. His armour and artillery assets... were virtually non-existent".

[35] According to Steenkamp (op. cit., p.50), Brig. Roos suggested an alternative attack from the east, while Roberto's Portuguese officers suggested a flanking attack through the swamps (but the FNLA soldiers refused point-blank to go into the swamps for fear of deadly snakes there).

[36] From author's interview with Roberto: "The first day when we launched our first attack, 8 November, a South African general appeared at Ambriz and told us not to, because South Africa was going to send here five battalions of South African commandos – that's 3,000 men. South Africans. They were also going to send later our troops in that Buffalo Battalion, 32 Battalion – they would also be sent. On 9 November, they said no, no because of pressure from the Americans and the British... So the South Africans said OK, we can't do anything then. So their troops never came, but on 9 November they sent 52 men to accompany the 140mm long-range guns". Although Roberto's claims may be unreliable, Steenkamp does mention that in early November 1975 Zulu Force's commander – 'Corky' Van Heerden – drew up plans for a simultaneous parachute assault and river crossing to be carried out by elite SADF forces, but was overruled by the SADF High Command (op. cit., p.48), all of which suggests that up until 9 November Roberto may have been relying on South African forces to capture Luanda for him.

while it was still relatively weak. In the end, he decided to chance an attack, and this decision was to haunt him for the rest of his life.[37]

A final assault was ordered for 10 November, and at Roberto's personal request the SADF agreed to provide three 140mm howitzers[38] to support the attackers (these were flown up to Ambriz in SAAF Canberras on 8 November) as well as a preliminary aerial bombardment of Quifangondo by Canberra bombers shortly before the attack began.[39] While the bombers and the guns (firing air-burst shells, which were particularly effective against infantry in trenches) softened up the defences, a commando force under Colonel Santos e Castro (a former officer in the Portuguese colonial army) would capture the bridge over the Bengo river, after which the main force would advance down the road towards Luanda, the South African guns being brought forward (so as to shell enemy positions in Luanda) as soon as was practical. The attacking force would number at least 1,500 men (including two battalions of Zairian troops and 120 Portuguese mercenaries), and would be supported by twelve armoured cars and six jeep-mounted 106mm recoilless guns, while four South African howitzers (manned by 52 SADF officers) and two North Korean 130mm guns bombarded Quifangondo from the southern ridges of Morro do Cal.[40] Awaiting the FNLA-Zairian force on the hills around Quifangondo were over one thousand FAPLA and Cuban troops, supported by an assortment of field guns, mortars and light artillery.[41] That night the first BM-21 missile-launcher was secretly driven up to

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[37] Roberto described the day of the battle of Quifangondo as being "the worst day in my life". Watching the BM-21 missiles raining down on his troops from a distance, he told me that he wished that the ground had opened up and swallowed him (author's interview with Roberto).

[38] The Cubans called the 140mm howitzer the 'vaca flotante' ('flying cow'), referring to the enormous size of the shells and the noise they made as they flew through the air which sounded like flapping wings (Ortiz, op. cit., p.77).

[39] Steenkamp (op. cit., p.49) explains the South Africans' puzzling decision to support Roberto's planned attack (after they had vociferously opposed the idea) by suggesting that Pretoria "cherished a faint hope that Angola, the land of surprises, might spring another one and allow him to succeed".

[40] As estimates of the size of Roberto's attacking force vary wildly, I have decided to use Stockwell's estimate (op. cit., p.213) as it seems the most plausible. The official Cuban history states that Roberto's force consisted of 3,000 men, 16 armoured cars, 24 guns & mortars, and 12 anti-tank guns (Rey, op. cit., p.53), while Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.19) come up with the preposterous figure of 6,800 men. Roberto (in interview with author) claimed that the FNLA had a total of 28,000 men under arms at the time – including 1,800 Zairian troops – although the fact he only used between 1,500 and 3,000 of them for the attack leads one to suspect that his estimates were wildly inflated (the CIA thought as much).

[41] In addition to the forces which fought on 8 November and the reinforcements sent from Cuba, a further ten Cuban officers from MMCA fought at Quifangondo on 10 November. Many of the FAPLA

Quifangondo, taking up position four miles behind Cuban lines, while the 164-man MININT force was placed in reserve at Cacuaco.

**The final attack on Quifangondo, 10 November 1975**

Throughout the night of 9/10 November the South African howitzers sporadically bombarded Quifangondo and Luanda (some even hitting targets around Grafanil, a major FAPLA barracks six miles south of Luanda, killing an Angolan woman), and shortly before 6am three SAAF Canberra bombers (flying from their Rundu base 750 miles to the south) bombed Quifangondo as planned.[42] Had the assault immediately been launched – insist the South Africans – the FNLA-Zairian force might have been able to overwhelm the defenders before they emerged from their underground bunkers. But Roberto had insisted on witnessing the advance in person, and according to one account his leisurely breakfast put back this advance forty minutes,[43] a delay which was to prove crucial. Having taken shelter from the ferocious South African bombardment in specially-constructed underground bunkers, the FAPLA-Cuban defenders emerged unharmed into their trenches to await their opponents' advance, and were under strict orders to hold their fire until the entire FNLA-Zairian force had emerged into the 500 yard corridor between the coast and the Panguila Lagoon. A dozen armoured cars spearheaded the attack, followed on foot by the bulk of the troops which dismounted from trucks at Granja Avícola (an abandoned chicken farm a couple of miles south of Morro do Cal). The column was allowed to advance several hundred yards before sporadic fire from the leading armoured car hit the parapet of a FAPLA gun emplacement, unleashing a devastating response.

In one moment the entire hillside erupted in a massive barrage of machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire, knocking out the leading four armoured cars and causing

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soldiers had reportedly only just finished their preliminary shooting course when they were loaded onto trucks and shipped to the front-line at Quifangondo.

[42] Due to the aircrafts' high altitude and radio silence, only one bomb scored a direct hit, but according to Steenkamp (op. cit., p.50) the effect of the bombardment was to force the FAPLA to evacuate some of its forward positions.

[43] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.50.

heavy casualties among the attacking infantry.[44] The advance buckled under the deluge of fire, and as reinforcements attempted to re-group at Granja Avícola the Cuban commanders brought their secret weapon into action: the BM-21. Stockwell describes the chilling moment: "The first salvo went long, screaming over the heads of bewildered FNLA soldiers and shattering the valley with a horrendous, ear-splitting sound. The next salvo was short, and the little army was bracketed, exposed in an open valley, without cover".[45] Two twenty-rocket salvos decimated the soldiers gathered at Granja Avícola, and then the BM-21 turned its fire on the main force attacking Quifangondo, raining down over 700 missiles on it over the next few hours.[46] "They had never seen anything quite like it," remembers Brig.-Gen. Víctor Schueg Colás. "They were suddenly lost for words".[47] Watching the carnage from Morro do Cal, the South African artillery was powerless to answer the BM-21's which outranged the 140mm guns by over two miles, and to add to the FNLA's misery both North Korean 130mm guns misfired on their first shots (the first misfire killing the entire crew).[48] The FNLA-Zairian attack quickly disintegrated, the fleeing troops – now more a disorganised mob – failing even to blow up the bridge over the Panguila Lagoon to cover their retreat, allowing the Cubans to capture it intact five

[44] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.19) maintain that due to the FAPLA gun position opening fire too early, only two armoured cars were destroyed. However, they may only be referring to the first salvos as Rey (op. cit, p.47) notes the destruction of four armoured cars during the battle.

[45] Stockwell (op. cit., p.163) describes the effect of a single 122mm missile in his book In Search of Enemies: "The percussion charge will shatter a small house or penetrate an eighteen-inch reinforced concrete bunker. The anti-personnel charge fragments into fourteen thousand red-hot, razor-sharp slivers of steel". The effect these missiles had on Roberto's exposed troops can be imagined.

[46] Stockwell (op. cit., p.214) estimates that over 2,000 of these missiles were fired at the FNLA-Zairian force before it withdrew, but Cuban figures reveal the actual number to be c.700 rockets, leaving the BM-21 system with only a tiny reserve by the end of the battle (Rey, op. cit., p.48).

[47] Author's translation of Víctor Schueg Colás in Báez, op. cit., p.179. Original Spanish reads: "Nunca los había visto. Con gran rapidez se les quitó la conversación."

[48] During lengthy discussions with the CIA's 40 Committee, John Stockwell (IAFeature's Task Force commander) had consistently argued that the FNLA needed a weapon comparable to the BM-21 if it was to defeat the MPLA in northern Angola. He suggested providing Roberto's forces with a flying gun platform of the type used in the Vietnam war, nicknamed 'Puff the Magic Dragon'. Consisting of a C-47 (large transport aircraft) with half a dozen Gatling guns mounted on its doors – each programmed to aim and fire simultaneously – a single C-47 could unleash 8,000 rounds per minute into an area the size of a football field: one bullet for every six inches of ground. In Stockwell's opinion: "There was no doubt that in August, September, and October 1975 a pair of these gun-ships would have completely broken the MPLA. But in August Carl's suggestion was rejected by Potts and the CIA director, who were still working under the original 40 Committee charter which did not encourage the CIA to seek ways of winning". By the time the CIA obtained 50 Soviet SA-7 SAMs from the Israelis (in exchange for 50 American-made Redeye SAMs), the FNLA had ceased to exist as a viable military force in Angola, and all reportedly malfunctioned when UNITA attempted to use them in Moxico in early 1976 (Stockwell, op. cit., pp.79, 163 & 181-182).

days later. On the road behind them they left half a dozen burning vehicles and over 100 dead.[49] The FAPLA-Cuban forces had lost only one man killed – a FAPLA soldier who had disobeyed orders to stay in his trench and had been killed by FNLA machine-gun fire – and five wounded (two of them Cuban).

The defeat at Quifangondo was a devastating blow to Roberto's dreams of capturing Luanda before Independence Day, and finally secured the MPLA's grip on Angola's capital. Cold War military technology had arrived dramatically in Africa, and the size of the battle at Quifangondo and the forces involved demonstrated just how far intervention by external powers had escalated the Angolan conflict since the first fighting broke out between the MPLA and FNLA exactly one year before. The repercussions of this battle would far exceed the losses in men and material sustained by the attackers, however, for within days it became clear that the psychological blow inflicted on Roberto's soldiers had broken their will to fight on. In fact it is no exaggeration to say that the battle of Quifangondo had destroyed the FNLA, even if heavy (though one-sided) fighting between them and the FAPLA-Cuban forces was to continue for another four months. For as exaggerated accounts of the defeat spread among Roberto's forces – who referred to Quifangondo as 'Nshila wa Lufu' ('The Road of Death') – discipline collapsed, and what started as a military withdrawal northwards quickly degenerated into a disorderly scramble for the Zairian border, forcing Roberto to take increasingly desperate measures to stem the FAPLA-Cuban advance.[50] The defeat also shattered the alliance with the CIA and South Africa, both teams of instructors withdrawing within a fortnight of the battle,[51] and this further

[49] Total FNLA-Zairian casualties at the battle of Quifangondo were most probably somewhere between 300 and 350 (i.e. 100-150 killed & c.200 wounded). Roberto admitted to me that up to 120 men had been killed, with an unspecified number of wounded, perhaps twice that figure (author's interview). Ortiz (op. cit., p.51) estimates the total number of casualties at 345, a figure broadly in line with Rey (op. cit., p.49) & Alfredo Fumero Castro & Mariano Mijares Tabares (Tergiversaciones del imperialismo norteamericano sobre la práctica del internacionalismo proletario de la revolución cubana con Angola, Escuela Superior del PCC 'Ñico López', Havana, 1982, p.52).

[50] Woflers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.34) note that during the withdrawal to Caxito, FNLA-Zairian troops refused to carry out a counter-attack on the bridge at Quipiri (from where Roberto and his CIA advisors had observed the battle), and the following day they ignored further attempts by Santos e Castro to marshal them at the Morro do Asfalto ('Asphalt Hill').

[51] The CIA team withdrew so quickly (around 24 November) that they left behind Brig. Roos and his 26-man team (whom Roos insists they had promised to evacuate with them), forcing him to call on the SAS President Steyn (which had been patrolling off Angola for some time) to help evacuate him and his men. Eventually, in the early morning of 28 November Roos and his team were evacuated from the

fuelled rumours that they had deliberately sabotaged the attack (although no logical reason for why they would have done this was ever given).[52] Sensing that they now had the military advantage, the Cuban commanders prepared an immediate counter-offensive, although they were careful not to make Roberto's mistake and chose to advance cautiously (they would not re-capture Caxito until 4 December).

## Portugal grants Angola independence, 10 November 1975

The very same afternoon that Cuban-FAPLA forces scored their devastating victories at N'to and Quifangondo, the Portuguese High Commissioner Commodore Leonel Cardoso officially granted Angola independence. The ceremony was by this stage almost meaningless, however, for any semblance of Portuguese authority in Angola had long since evaporated – as the missiles raining down only a few miles away at Quifangondo attested. Despite having displayed a marked sympathy towards the MPLA during Angola's chaotic decolonisation, the Portuguese government decided not to recognise any one independence movement and instead bizarrely granted independence to 'the people of Angola' (a quite unique act among all of Europe's colonial powers), withdrawing their colonial government from Angola without leaving anything in its place. In fairness to the Portuguese, the time had long since passed (probably around August 1975) when they could exert an influence on events in Angola, but this did little to excuse the stark fact that after nearly 500 years of colonial domination they were washing their hands of a colony which had once been the jewel in their African Empire – and which had made many Portuguese *rich – and* were leaving it to a terrible fate. That evening – with fighting engulfing the entire country, hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Angola, and no less than three huge foreign armies fighting it out for supremacy – Commodore Leonel Cardoso

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beach at Ambrizete (N'zeto), reaching the South African military base at Walvis Bay (Namibia) two days later (Steenkamp, op. cit., pp.51-52).

[52] In particular, the FNLA troops were shocked by their artillery's inability to answer the devastating barrage of fire coming from the FAPLA-Cubans, and they were outraged when they discovered that not only had the heavy mortars and 106mm recoilless guns provided by the CIA arrived without handling instructions or sighting equipment, but also that the American instructors who were due to operate the weapons did not arrive until after the battle. In fairness to the CIA, the instructions and sights had been sent with the weaponry to Kinshasa, but were lost in transit. Nevertheless, the fiasco over the artillery provided by the CIA contrasts starkly with Cuban efforts to get the BM-21 operational in time for the battle, a feat which proved decisive to the outcome of the battle.

boarded a Portuguese frigate and sailed out of Luanda harbour. It is hard to imagine how Portugal could have bequeathed Angola a more shameful or cruel legacy.[53]

In Luanda the MPLA held delirious celebrations as midnight struck (the moment when Angola formally became independent), celebrating the vanquishing not only of its oldest oppressor – Portugal – but of its oldest rival – the FNLA. To cheering crowds Neto declared the formation of the People's Republic of Angola (PRA) – which was immediately recognised by nearly thirty countries (among them MPLA stalwarts such as Cuba, the Soviet Union and the PALOPs), while 75 miles to the north in Ambriz a dispirited FNLA and UNITA delegation declared the Popular Democratic Republic of Angola (PDRA) – which was recognised by no one. By now reports had come in that the FLEC-Zairian invasion of Cabinda had been halted, and it was with a renewed sense of determination that the FAPLA-Cuban commanders turned their attention back to the south where the third and final threat to Luanda – Zulu Force – was advancing rapidly from Lobito. Halting the South African advance would be a very different experience, however, for the soldiers in Zulu Force were of a very different calibre from those the Cubans had so far encountered in Angola. The truth (although few Cuban commanders would be prepared to admit it) was that the soldiers they had defeated at N'to and Quifangondo were poorly-motivated and undisciplined, a fact their South African and CIA advisors had been quick to notice. In both attacks they had shown abysmal tactical thinking – opting for suicidal full-frontal assaults against well-defended positions – and they had paid the inevitable price. Zulu Force, on the other hand, had shown great tactical originality up until now, and the danger that this force might surprise the Cubans (as it would do on more than one occasion) would make the campaign against them in Cuanza Sul the most dangerous and costly of Operation Carlota.

[53] Crocker (in 'Peacemaking in Southern Africa: The Namibia-Angola Settlement of 1988', Georgetown University Web-site, 1998) later described Portugal's sudden departure from Angola as "one of the messiest and most irresponsible acts of decolonisation in the post-1945 period".

## The race to the Queve river, early November 1975

Following the violent clash at Catengue on 2 November, the South Africans had continued their relentless advance northwards, moving almost immediately on Angola's most important commercial ports – Benguela and Lobito. Opting for a two-pronged pincer advance, the SADF High Command ordered Zulu Force to move directly north from Catengue to attack Benguela from the south whilst – simultaneously – Foxbat moved west from Norton de Matos (Caluita) towards Lobito, cutting off the defenders' only line of retreat and effectively encircling them. The FAPLA-Cuban commanders – who by now knew a final assault on Benguela to be imminent – thus faced a terrible dilemma: either they could withdraw their forces from Benguela and Lobito without a fight and further endanger the MPLA's already tenuous grip on Luanda, or they could make a final stand and risk being surrounded and completely annihilated by the South Africans, an equally disastrous outcome. Their indecision was adequately demonstrated the day after the dispiriting defeat at Catengue when (possibly erroneous) reports that South African armoured cars were operating in the Pundo mountains above Lobito led to an immediate order to evacuate Benguela, an order which they quickly rescinded once it became clear that Zulu Force had not still not yet launched its final assault on the city.[54] It was thus in the shadow of the constant threat posed by Foxbat that the FAPLA-Cubans attempted to defend Benguela and Lobito, and ultimately the threat of encirclement was to prove too great for them to continue.

On 5 November – after a couple of days spent recuperating and clearing FAPLA positions east of Catengue[55] – Zulu Force (spearheaded by Alpha) set out from

[54] According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.24), the decision to evacuate infuriated the hundreds of FAPLA soldiers who had just arrived in Benguela from Novo Redondo (Sumbe) to defend the city, and this anger turned to confusion when they were then told to re-occupy Benguela. This premature (and bungled) evacuation might explain why Zulu Force encountered no FAPLA presence until reaching Benguela's airport on the city's southern outskirts.

[55] On 4 November Zulu Force were sent to capture Cubal, 40 miles east of Catengue. Initially mistaken for Cubans by two FAPLA soldiers as they entered Caimbambo (roughly half way to Cubal), Bravo had a hard fight with the FAPLA garrison who were all killed. Then, using information from a captured FAPLA commander – apparently given quite enthusiastically – a phased attack was launched on Cubal which was thought to be deserted until the rear-guard clashed with a FAPLA patrol returning to town, killing them all. A patrol was sent out to search for any other FAPLA soldiers in the area, and was followed by another without their commanders' knowledge or permission. As both patrols

Catengue to capture Benguela. Expecting only weak resistance after their hard-fought victory at Catengue, the South African commanders opted for a full-frontal assault on the city, perhaps hoping that after a brief fight the defenders would melt away as they had done on several previous occasions (for example at Sá da Bandeira and Moçâmedes). Advancing rapidly west through various deserted towns, Alpha quickly came upon the abandoned Cuban CIR eight miles south of Benguela, where it seized over thirty tonnes of petrol, ammunition and supplies which had been left behind in the FAPLA's hasty retreat.[56] Alpha then continued on to the airport (nine miles south of the city), and it was there that it ran into heavy resistance.[57] FAPLA mortar positions in the city centre and a single 'Katyusha' (122mm) rocket battery on the hills above Benguela began a noisy barrage which quickly pinned down Alpha's troops and brought their advance to a standstill. FAPLA or Cuban commandos (accounts differ) then launched a daring counter-attack which briefly succeeded in re-capturing the airport, forcing Alpha to abandon four armoured cars and several 140mm guns.[58] Alpha managed to re-take the airport, however, recovering the vehicles and guns unharmed, but their confidence had been shaken and they were to remain pinned down at the airport until nightfall under a constant bombardment by

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returned, they ran into each other and opened fire, killing two, wounding two, and destroying two Landrovers. Breytenbach concluded: "So our Cubal adventure ended on a very sad and somewhat sour note" (Breytenbach, op. cit., pp.88-95).

[56] When Breytenbach arrived at the Cuban CIR to set up Zulu HQ, he described the place as "one big filthy mess. The Cubans had no idea whatsoever of hygiene. They in fact 'crapped' inside and outside the quartel, on top of the embankment, inside the few buildings and, it seemed to me, wherever the urge took them. The place stank!" According to Breytenbach, the buildings were so infested with fleas that Zulu HQ was set up nearby the buildings in tents (op. cit., pp.98-99). It is also possible, however, that the retreating troops deliberately trashed the CIR to prevent the South Africans using it.

[57] While Alpha fought it out at the airport, Bravo was sent west to Baia Farta in response to rumours that FAPLA soldiers had abducted Portuguese families and taken them there to use as human shields. A local Portuguese man from the town soon confirmed that the rumours were untrue, however, and the FAPLA HQ was quickly found to be deserted.

[58] Cuban accounts of the raid differ somewhat from their Angolan allies. According to Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.344), a ten-man Cuban commando force carried out the raid on the airport, "causing the South Africans some losses in vehicles... It was a very audacious attack, but very humiliating for the South Africans" (author's translation). However, Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.25) describe a three-pronged FAPLA attack on the airport – one group under 'Mundo Real' attacking from the beach, a second from the Benfica area and a third under 'Monty' engaging the South Africans head-on, supported by several 120mm guns. According to them, covering fire prevented the Angolans from seizing (or destroying) the four South African armoured cars left behind. Both accounts appear to be referring to the same attack on Benguela airport (which could only have occurred on 5 November), so it is unclear which is accurate, or whether the attack was simply a joint FAPLA-Cuban operation.

the 'Red Eyes' (as the South Africans called the 'Katyushas').[59] That evening Zulu's commanders met to discuss a change in tactics, belatedly recognising that Benguela "would be a very tough nut to crack".[60]

Anxious to avoid costly house-to-house fighting – which would be very bloody and would most likely leave the city in ruins – they decided to launch a flanking attack through the east of the city in order to capture the high ground to the north, thus neutralising the 'Katyusha' batteries and cutting off the FAPLA's only line of retreat.[61] This change in tactics was to prove unnecessary, however, for throughout the previous day the FAPLA-Cuban commanders had been receiving further reports of a South African military presence in the Pundo mountains above Lobito, and by the following morning they had decided that the risk of encirclement was simply too great – and that it was time to withdraw from Benguela and Lobito while they still could.[62] A second evacuation of both cities was therefore ordered and the defending forces quickly fled northwards towards Novo Redondo (Sumbe) – to the consternation of many pro-MPLA civilians who had returned to defend their city after the first bungled evacuation and now found themselves at the mercy of UNITA.[63] By the time Bravo launched its attack on the city's southern suburbs the following morning, what little resistance was left quickly melted away and Zulu Force was able to occupy the rest of Benguela almost unopposed.[64] Aware that Lobito had also been abandoned by the FAPLA, Zulu Force quickly moved to occupy the port the next day (7 November),[65]

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[59] The Afrikaans term 'Rooi Oog' ('Red Eye') was applied to the 122mm 'Katyusha' rockets because of the way they resembled red eyes streaking through the sky when fired at night.

[60] Breytenbach, op. cit., p.99.

[61] According to Uys (op. cit., p.35), the South African commanders were forced to adopt this plan of attack when the following morning Alpha's Bushmen troops refused to carry out a full-frontal attack on the city.

[62] It is also probable that the heavy casualties the FAPLA-Cuban forces had sustained during the defence of Benguela convinced the commanders to go ahead with the withdrawal. Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.24) note that during the fighting at Benguela FAPLA commander 'Sapu' lost 723 of his men in less than two hours, although it is likely that many of these losses were due to desertion.

[63] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.51) claim that between Zulu Force's capture of Benguela (6 November 1975) and UNITA's expulsion by FAPLA-Cuban forces (10 February 1976), over 500 MPLA supporters were murdered by UNITA, under the orders of their chief Jorge Valentim (currently Angolan Minister for Tourism). They were allegedly taken up to the Pundo crossroads and shot, earning the area the nickname 'The Hill of Death'.

[64] According to Breytenbach (op. cit., p.102), Zulu Force's entry into Benguela was greeted by cheering crowds of FNLA and UNITA supporters, further boosting the South Africans' confidence.

[65] As he passed through Lobito, Breytenbach noted "the completely wrecked MPLA Headquarters. Evidently that very morning, without any prompting the Lobito population had attacked the MPLA and

setting up camp seven miles to the north (so as to avoid losing half their men to Lobito's infamous brothels).[66]

**Divisions start to emerge in South African leadership over Angolan operation**

The capture of Lobito completed Zulu Force's conquest of southern Angola and brought the Benguela railway line as far east as Silva Porto (Kuito-Bié) under South African control. However, divisions had by now started to emerge in the South African leadership, and once it became clear that Zulu Force would not reach Luanda by Independence Day the first calls to withdraw from Angola started to emerge. Calculating that a 1,500-man SADF force would be needed to capture Luanda which could sustain up to 40% casualties in the process, many in the South African Cabinet favoured immediate withdrawal while Zulu Force still had the military advantage, and for this purpose 101 Task Force was set up at Rundu (Namibia) to prepare for the pull-out.[67] Perhaps sensing that a South African withdrawal was now imminent, on 10 November Savimbi flew to Pretoria to implore President Vorster to keep Zulu Force in Angola until a vital OAU meeting on the war in Angola – scheduled for 9 December – was held in Addis Ababa. Insisting that many OAU leaders were opposed to an exclusive MPLA government in Angola (Savimbi for once was telling the truth here), Savimbi urged Pretoria to keep up the military pressure on the MPLA, reasoning that the more Angolan territory under FNLA and UNITA control (all of Zulu Force's gains had been handed over to either of the two movements) the stronger their position would be in the OAU negotiations which would inevitably follow. Despite serious misgivings in the South African camp, Vorster nevertheless agreed to extend the operation beyond 11 November, ordering Zulu Force to advance and capture as much territory as possible before the OAU met.

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driven them out of the city. I was told later that quite a number of MPLA officials were killed" (op. cit., p.104).

[66] While in Lobito there were several unpleasant incidents at Lobito's docks when South African officers were beaten up by UNITA troops who they had caught looting. Tensions were only finally cooled after 'Corky' spoke personally to Jorge Valentim, the UNITA area boss, but the experience left some bitterness among Zulu Force's commanders for UNITA in general.

The decision was fundamentally flawed, however, for such were the divisions among the African members of the OAU that the vital meeting would end up being postponed several times (it did not take place until 12 January 1976), leading to great confusion among Zulu Force's commanders on the ground in Angola who from mid-November to mid-January 1976 were ordered to withdraw several times, only to have the order reversed when the long-awaited OAU meeting looked as if it would go ahead after all. Vorster's decision to extend Operation Savannah beyond 11 November thus put Zulu Force's commanders in a no-win situation, for not only did it starve them of a clear-cut military objective (such as capturing Luanda, or advancing as far as the Cuanza river), but it also ensured that any military gains they did achieve would probably have to be abandoned quickly, making the remaining two months of the operation a pointless waste of time and human lives. Pretoria was belatedly trying to prevent Operation Savannah from escalating further, but with thousands of Cuban troops now pouring into Angola it was far too late to turn back, and Vorster's half-way decision to veto any further South African reinforcements (aside from those already on their way) merely ensured that when Foxbat did finally achieve the long-awaited breakthrough at 'Bridge 14', it would be unable to follow it up (see below). Thus in mid-November – just as at Cuito Cuanavale thirteen years later – the South African force found itself fatally constrained by Pretoria's poorly-conceived strategy, and the direct result of this would be to hand the Cuban and MPLA governments a propaganda victory the completeness of which they could scarcely have imagined.

**Zulu Force advances towards the Queve river, 11-13 November**

With its logistics now secured through Angola's most important commercial ports, on 11 November Zulu Force was ordered to continue its advance northwards along the coast, capturing Novo Redondo (Sumbe) and Porto Amboim before turning inland towards Gabela and Quibala (see map). Simultaneously Foxbat (which had finally linked up with Zulu Force on 8 November) would return to the interior and advance along the main road north from Alto Hama towards Quibala, where both forces would

[67] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.54. Steenkamp also notes that by mid-November the decision had been taken by the South African Cabinet to withdraw from Angola, it was just the exact timing of when to start the pull-out which was to prove so thorny.

then link up for the final push on Luanda (a little over 200 miles to the north). Two new mixed South African-UNITA Battle-Groups – X-Ray and Orange – would also be formed in Silva Porto (Kuito-Bié) to extend UNITA's influence over the Angolan interior, Orange advancing northwards towards Malanje while X-Ray headed east to capture Luso (Luena) and secure the rest of the Benguela railway-line. With this escalated commitment of South African forces in Angola, "the whole campaign was" – in Breytenbach's words – "beginning to look more South African than Angolan",[68] and there was little reason to think the FAPLA would be capable of stopping this formidable military force from capturing Luanda within the week. The South Africans' confidence in their ability to continue advancing northwards was misplaced, however, for the very day the leading elements of Zulu Force set out from Lobito (12 November)[69] the FAPLA-Cuban commanders in Luanda turned their attention back to the south, and their rapid deployment of newly-arrived Cuban forces would halt Zulu Force once and for all.[70]

Zulu Force's advance was again spearheaded by Alpha which rapidly moved northwards, easily brushing aside a FAPLA ambush at the Cuula river (40 miles north of Lobito), and quickly reaching the bridge over the Quicombo river, eight miles south of Novo Redondo. Surprised to find the bridge still passable (the Cubans had in fact laid explosive charges on it earlier that day, but they had failed to destroy it completely), Alpha immediately advanced over the bridge only to run straight into a

[68] Op. cit., p.108.

[69] The exact chronology of events which led to the capture of Novo Redondo is extremely confused as each account differs on the date of the city's capture and on how long this took to achieve. Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.26) state that South African artillery began to bombard Novo Redondo on 10 November and that the city was captured on 13 November, whereas Uys (op. cit., p.36-37) states Zulu Force left Lobito on 10 November and captured Novo Redondo on 12 November. Steenkamp (op. cit., p.48) and Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.345) date the city's capture on 14 November. Breytenbach, who might be able to settle the dispute, gives no dates in his account, but is quite clear that his force captured Novo Redondo the day after it left Lobito, whenever that might have been. Given that Cuban special forces arrived in Porto Amboim on 13 November to blow the bridges over the Queve river – and that Breytenbach discovered these bridges blown the day after his forces captured Novo Redondo – it would seem logical to conclude the following chronology: 12 November – Zulu Force leaves Lobito, runs into ambush at Quicombo river; 13 November: Zulu Force captures Novo Redondo, bridges blown by Cubans in the night; 14 November: Zulu force discovers bridges blown.

[70] The decision not to advance northwards immediately gave the FAPLA-Cubans vital breathing space to re-organise their defences, an error Breytenbach (op. cit., p.111) later recognised: "We certainly were giving them enough time to catch their breath, after the pounding they received at Benguela and further south. Next time we were going to run into well-organised defensive systems. The four day's break, though welcome for resting the troops, could turn out to be a big mistake in the end".

second ambush.[71] Alpha's two leading armoured cars were quickly knocked out by RPG-7's, and as the force withdrew one of Alpha's mortar platoons took a direct hit, killing one and wounding seventeen others. A noisy artillery duel then broke out which lasted for most of the day, Zulu Force's troops not being able to outflank the FAPLA-Cuban position as the bridge (which was the only means of crossing the river) was under heavy fire. At dusk the FAPLA-Cuban forces eventually started to withdraw towards Novo Redondo, probably having suffered several casualties.[72] The following morning (13 November) Bravo led the assault on Novo Redondo, encountering only light resistance and quickly capturing the city.[73] Anxious to press on northwards, Zulu Force then split in two, Alpha heading inland towards Gabela while Bravo moved north to capture Porto Amboim, from where it was only two hours to Luanda (with the Cuanza river as the only major obstacle in Bravo's path). It was at this point, however, that Operation Savannah quite suddenly ground to a halt.

**The Cubans blow up the bridges over the Cuanza river, 13 November**

The reason for Zulu Force's sudden change in fortune was the arrival on 13 November of the first Cuban reinforcements (one and half companies of Special Forces) in Porto Amboim.[74] Charged with halting Zulu Force using any means possible, the 150-man Cuban force arrived as Bravo was launching its final assault on Novo Redondo (only 40 miles south of them), and they moved immediately to contain the advance northwards. Expecting an attack on Porto Amboim and Gabela at any moment, it was decided to destroy the three bridges over the Queve (or Cuvo) river –

[71] Alpha's commander, Cmdt Linford, later stated that for Battle-Group Alpha the ambush at the Quicombo river was the turning-point of Operation Savannah, and that "from that moment everything went wrong. Everything" (quoted in Uys, op. cit., p.37).

[72] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.115) noted after the battle that "the tar road and adjacent areas were covered in shell splinters, gaps being torn out of the tar, splashes of blood on the road surface and bloody bandages littering the scene", suggesting heavy FAPLA losses.

[73] Two FAPLA soldiers were killed when they attempted to ambush Bravo as it entered Novo Redondo, and several more were killed and wounded in a brief fire-fight on an escarpment overlooking the city. Bravo's troops also found "the usual heaps of camouflaged uniforms, some of them covered in blood, as FAPLA hastily discarded all evidence that they were soldiers. This was a normal proceeding we had met up with earlier in the campaign" (Breytenbach, op. cit., p.118).

[74] According to Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.344), these Special Forces were made up of one full company under Captain Estéban Manuel which had arrived in Luanda on 8 November and had been held in reserve during the battle of Quigangondo, and half a company under Colonel René Hernández which arrived in Luanda a couple of days later.

the only significant barrier between Novo Redondo and the towns to the north – in the hope that this would give the FAPLA-Cuban forces breathing-space in which to reorganise their shattered defences. That night Cuban demolition teams raced to Gabela where they blew the main bridge over the Queve river at Sete Pontos (12 miles south of Gabela), deploying a Cuban company to warn of any South African advance into the area. They then drove west and blew the Caxoeiras bridge (30 miles south-west of Gabela) and then the only bridge into Porto Amboim (15 miles south of Porto Amboim), effectively blocking any further South African advance along the coast.[75] Having bungled several previous attempts to blow up bridges in the path of Zulu Force,[76] the FAPLA-Cubans had this time seized the initiative, and given that the rainy season had begun swelling the Queve into a raging torrent, they could be confident that at least for now Zulu Force had been contained.[77] What the Cubans probably did not realise, however, was that this single act would permanently halt Zulu Force's advance northwards, for by blowing the bridges over the Queve they exploited the South Africans' main weakness – namely their lack of bridge-building equipment – and presented them with what was in effect an insurmountable obstacle.

The significance of the Cuban move immediately became apparent to the South Africans the following morning (14 November) when Bravo set out from Novo Redondo for Porto Amboim, expecting to capture the port by nightfall. Advancing with a troop of armoured cars and a platoon of infantry Cmdt Breytenbach found the bridge completely destroyed, and his force was immediately drawn into a fire-fight with FAPLA soldiers dug in on the other bank. Soon Cuban BM-21's (which had arrived in Porto Amboim shortly before the fall of Benguela) were firing salvos at the South African force, and its commander – who was determined not to withdraw without "a defiant gesture" – brought up his 25-pounder guns to counter-bombard the

[75] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.27) note that the only alternative crossing of the Queve – the ancient ferry at Kambalu – had been inoperative for years.
[76] For example, on 31 October a FAPLA force left explosive charges on the bridge north of Quilengues, but these failed to explode, allowing Zulu Force to advance on Catengue the following day. The failure to completely destroy the bridge over the Quicombo river on 12 November likewise allowed Zulu Force to capture Novo Redondo the following day.
[77] The Cuban sappers failed to destroy the only remaining bridge over the Queve at Techirimba (65 miles south of Quibala), however, and as a last-minute alternative they severely damaged the bridge over the Nhia river (23 miles south of Quibala), thus preventing a lightning strike by Foxbat on

BM-21 positions, three of which his gunners claim to have destroyed. (The Cubans for their part claim that their BM-21's destroyed five South African armoured cars during the engagement.)[78] Eventually withdrawing Bravo to Novo Redondo, Breytenbach sent out a patrol to check if the Caxoeiras bridge to Gabela was still serviceable, but they soon returned with the news that it had been completely destroyed, and attempts to find alternative crossings (the Queve is shallower at some points east of the Caxoeiras bridge) foundered when Breytenbach's men refused to ford the turbulent river. The coastal advance of Zulu Force was thus effectively blocked, and Alpha's commander (who was posted along with his Battle-Group to Novo Redondo for the remainder of the campaign) was to have a frustrating time over the next two months as he dreamed up daring schemes to get his forces across the river, none of which were successful.[79]

Thus on 14 November – ten days after the Cuban government had belatedly launched Operation Carlota – the three forces threatening the MPLA's survival in Angola had been defeated or contained. In Cabinda and at Quifangondo the FAPLA-Cuban force had inflicted devastating defeats on FLEC and the FNLA (from which they would never fully recover), and at the Queve river quick thinking by the Cuban commanders had prevented Cuanza Sul (and possibly Luanda) from being overwhelmed by Zulu Force's confident advance. The war was far from over, but the total eclipse of the MPLA as a political and military force in Angola had been prevented, and the FAPLA-Cuban commanders would now have sufficient breathing-space in which to re-organise their forces and draw up plans for a counter-offensive. As if to compound Zulu Force's turn in fortune, the following day Fred Bridgland – a journalist who had travelled to southern Angola to report on the war – filed a story confirming the

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Quibala. The failure to definitively cut off this line of advance would later have serious consequences for the Cuban forces (see 'The Battle of Bridge 14', below).

[78] Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.39. Neither side recognises any losses on their own side, which suggests that someone is lying.

[79] Alpha's commander, Cmdt Linford, instantly recognised a stale-mate: "We had no bridge-building equipment and as we couldn't get across the rivers it was more or less the end of the war". Alpha went on to capture Vila Nova de Seles (Uku) and Conda – both south of the Queve – but found the Sete Pontos bridge destroyed, several officers being wounded by FAPLA 82mm fire while inspecting the bridge. Linford planned an amphibious landing at Porto Amboim using the SAS President Steyn which was patrolling off the coast, but the navy refused to co-operate, and several attempts to send 15 men from the SADF's Recce Commando over the Queve in boats had to be abandoned when they drew heavy fire from the other shore (Uys, op. cit., pp.42 & 37-38).

rumours that South African troops were fighting in Angola, finally blowing the lid off Pretoria's 'secret invasion'. The international outcry which greeted this news – especially from South Africa's neighbouring states – was a diplomatic disaster for Pretoria, and immediately re-doubled the pressure on Zulu Force to complete Operation Savannah as quickly as possible.[80] The Cubans, on the other hand, were in no hurry to take on Zulu Force, preferring to pin it down at the Queve river until sufficient military reinforcements had arrived from Cuba to launch the inevitable counter-offensive.

**Lead-up to the ambush at Ebo**

A complex defensive line was therefore set up – running from the Porto Amboim bridge, through Gabela and Cariango, to Mussende – with the intention of blocking every possible invasion route from the south (see map).[81] This defensive plan – while successfully blocking any attempt to advance along the coast or inland from Silva Porto[82] – had one central flaw however, namely that the Cuban teams had failed to destroy the last remaining bridge over the Queve at Techirimba (65 miles south of Quibala), allowing Foxbat to advance rapidly north from Alto Hama on 15 November and capture Cela.[83] Over the following weeks, the FAPLA-Cuban forces would pay for this oversight as the entire area between Gabela and Quibala in the north and Cela and the Queve river in the south was converted into a vast no-man's-land, through which FAPLA-Cuban and South African forces patrolled, raided and (occasionally) launched assaults.[84] Setting up his headquarters in Cela,[85] Foxbat's commander

[80] The size of South Africa's blunder was adequately demonstrated a fortnight later (on 27 November) when Nigeria – at the time one of the West's most stalwart African allies – officially recognised the PRA, citing the South African intervention as the reason for its change in policy.
[81] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.40) note that the Cubans also began to operate a logistics base at Dondo, 90 miles north of Quibala, to support the FAPLA-Cuban forces at Quibala and Gabela.
[82] The coastal route was effectively blocked by the blown bridges, as the only alternative route to Malanje from Silva Porto involved a circuitous 700-mile journey via Luso (Luena) and Saurimo, any part of which could easily be made impassable by blowing any of the dozens of bridges along the way.
[83] According to Steenkamp (op. cit., p.47), Foxbat's forward elements ran into a FAPLA-Cuban reconnaissance patrol just south of Cela, destroying a black Citroën which was carrying a Cuban brigadier.
[84] Both Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.42) and Hallett (op. cit., p.373) note that a South African reconnaissance aircraft was shot down over the Caxoeiras bridge during this period, although no date for this is given. Wolfers & Bergerol claim that several white SADF officers were killed in the crash, Pretoria later announcing they had died in Namibia. South African sources make no reference to the

George Kruys sent a team of engineers to check if the road was clear to the north, but they soon reported back that the bridge over the Nhia river (which they designated 'Bridge 14') had been severely damaged, and that until it was repaired a direct advance on Quibala was impossible. Kruys therefore decided to advance west along a smaller road via Ebo and Assango towards Gabela, Foxbat's other principal objective. Over the next couple of days Foxbat cleared FAPLA positions off the Tongo hills north of Santa Comba (Uaco-Cungo) – a vitally important area over which Cuban and South African troops would fight bitterly in late December – and on 18 November reached Ebo, 30 miles south-east of Gabela. Anxious to maintain the momentum of the advance, Kruys decided not to wait for Bravo and pressed on unsupported, and on 23 November Foxbat ran into a FAPLA-Cuban ambush just west of Ebo, precipitating the first serious military set-back of Operation Savannah.

## The ambush at Ebo, 23 November 1975

The FAPLA-Cuban commanders had been expecting a South African strike towards Gabela along this route (they had destroyed the bridges on almost every other approach to Gabela) and had positioned their forces well. A total of 60 Cubans and two companies of FAPLA soldiers (c.200 men) were dug in on the high ground west of Ebo, with one BM-21 battery, one 76mm field gun and two armoured cars in support. Unaware of these enemy positions, Foxbat's leading elements – a company of Bushmen and up to a dozen armoured cars[86] – advanced as far as a small river overlooked by the hills, the infantry fording the river and fanning out across the open ground while the armoured cars hung back on the other side. Unwittingly walking right into the middle of a FAPLA-Cuban position, the Bushman company was taken

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alleged incident. An SADF brigadier was killed in a helicopter crash in Angola during Operation Savannah (on 3 January 1976), but no mention was made by the SADF of enemy action causing the crash.

[85] Cela was founded in the late 1950s by white settlers who were among tens of thousands who emigrated from Portugal to Angola during this period, and as such was viewed by the local population as a symbol of colonial exploitation (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.38). Hundreds of white settlers had withdrawn to Cela from Santa Comba in late 1975 as fighting between UNITA, the FNLA and the MPLA increased, and many were reportedly glad to see the South Africans.

[86] According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.42), Foxbat was made up of 75 armoured cars and hundreds of troops, which seems grossly exaggerated. Ortiz (op. cit., p.65) claims there was a total of 30 South African tanks and a battalion of men (c.300 men) seem more accurate, although he probably mistakes tanks for armoured cars, as it is unlikely South Africa had any tanks in Cuanza Sul at the time.

completely by surprise when the FAPLA-Cuban defenders "opened up with murderous automatic, mortar and other shell fire, quickly cutting down the whole company, including the company commander".[87] Foxbat's commanders attempted to start withdrawing, but their armoured cars were unable to manoeuvre in the mud and at least seven of them were destroyed by Cuban anti-tank rounds, precipitating a disorganised retreat towards Cela.[88] Bravo – which had arrived in Cela that morning – was immediately ordered northwards to cover Foxbat's retreat (and a possible FAPLA-Cuban counter-attack against Cela), quickly occupying Santa Comba and setting up defences just west of there. The expected FAPLA-Cuban counter-attack never occurred, however, and eventually the battered remnants of Foxbat appeared, the wounded in a very bad way.[89] At least 30 had been killed in the ambush, and up to 60 wounded, many of them left behind on the other side of the river where (according to Breytenbach) they were summarily executed by the FAPLA-Cubans.[90]

The ambush at Ebo was the South Africans' first serious military set-back of Operation Savannah, although it was not quite the devastating defeat which the MPLA and Cuban government have since tried to depict. The losses in men, equipment and armour were not catastrophic, but they did bruise Foxbat's morale and significantly weakened its fighting capability, forcing the South Africans to halt their advance and retrench their positions while Foxbat attempted to rebuild itself. Bravo was sent north to occupy the high ground south of 'Bridge 14' (on the Nhia river) to prevent a FAPLA-Cuban counter-offensive, and its reports that the bridge had not been completely destroyed (although it was at the time impassable) appear to have given Foxbat's commander an idea for a surprise attack. Determined to exact revenge

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[87] Breytenbach (op. cit., p.132) takes his description from 'Silva', an Angolan commander in Foxbat, who later told him what had happened.

[88] Lúcio Lara, Deputy Chief of the MPLA, later described the scene they left behind: "They left everything on the field: men, vehicles, weapons. It was a great victory over the South Africans" (quoted in interview in 'Cold War', op. cit.). Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.43) wrongly date the battle on 23 December 1975, and claim that two white SADF officers and over 200 of their black soldiers were killed in the fighting, and 14 South African armoured cars were destroyed. Ortiz (op. cit., p.66) is more modest in his claims, noting that that five South African tanks were destroyed in the engagement, but he is probably confusing South African tanks with armoured cars. The South Africans for their part admit that up to eight armoured cars were destroyed.

[89] In 'Cold War' (op. cit.), Breytenbach described what he saw: "They were shot up very badly. I just saw these lorries with blood dripping out of it, and it wasn't very nice... And then to go and investigate, and for the first time you see that actually your own troops are... it wasn't very nice at all".

[90] Breytenbach, op. cit., p.132.

for the humiliating defeat at Ebo, Cmdt Kruys planned to repair the bridge secretly under cover of darkness and then launch a lightning attack the following morning against the enemy positions on the other side, catching them completely unprepared. With FAPLA-Cuban forces still operating south of the Nhia river, Kruys sent out patrols to reconnoitre their positions and start driving them out of the area, while in Santa Comba Foxbat began preparations for launching the attack over 'Bridge 14'. Next time it would be the turn of the Cubans to be complacent, and at the 'Battle of Bridge 14' (as it later became known) Foxbat would turn the tables on the FAPLA-Cubans, inflicting Cuba's heaviest defeat of the campaign (see below).

**The Cubans prepare counter-offensives as their presence in Angola grows**

On 25 November 1975 – two days after the ambush at Ebo – Gen. Abelardo Colomé Ibarra ('Furry'), First Vice-Minister of the FAR, flew into Luanda to assume command of MMCA. Ironically, the very same day a coup in Lisbon brought the 'Verão Quente' ('Hot Summer') to an end, and with it the Portuguese Revolution, this peculiar coincidence of events perhaps suggesting that the Revolution had managed to remove one foreign power (Portugal) from Angola only to replace it with another (Cuba). MMCA's responsibilities had by now grown from the relatively simple task of commanding a small 500-man training mission to co-ordinating a military intervention dozens of times the size, and Furry's appointment as MMCA's commander was as much an acknowledgement of the new challenges posed by Operation Carlota as it was a sign that Argüelles no longer had the confidence of Havana's commanders.[91] The logistical complexities of the operation – which involved processing the arrival of thousands of troops, issuing them with weaponry and supplies, and then sending them off to diverse units around Angola – were enormous, and 'Furry' quickly became in his own words the 'lightning rod' ('el pararrayos') of the operation. "Everyone came to me to ask me what they should do,"

[91] The appointment of 'Furry' was not necessarily a direct snub to Argüelles as most governments would tend to appoint a more senior commander once an operation of the scope and size of Operation Carlota had got underway. Nevertheless, Argüelles' reports to 'Furry' about the state of forces ranged against the Cubans in late October and early November had been dangerously inaccurate and nearly led to total military catastrophe, and one can only wonder what long-term effect this would have had on

he later recalled. "I directly commanded the planning and conduct of our operations myself. Every time I had to make a decision, I didn't send a cable to Cuba asking for advice, although every day at 6pm I would transmit a report on how things were going".[92]

This daily report was intended for Fidel Castro who throughout Operation Carlota was the Supreme Commander of the Cuban Forces, and who was reputed to have spent up to fourteen hours a day in the operations room specially built for him in the basement of MINFAR (on Havana's Plaza de la Revolución).[93] All senior Cuban veterans have since emphasised his intricate knowledge of the operations theatre – he allegedly knew the exact location of every Cuban unit, tank, mortar and heavy gun in Angola – and it is clear that Castro wielded a commanding influence over the Cuban operation at every stage.[94] More independent-minded officers – such as Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez who later clashed with Castro during the Cuito Cuanavale campaign (see Chapter 10) – might have found Castro's constant interference unhelpful or possibly even counter-productive, but in 'Furry' Castro had a loyal and obedient subordinate, and the professional relationship they were to develop over the following months (at six thousand miles distance) would quickly turn 'Furry' into his preferred trouble-shooter in Angola. Castro's principal message-bearer would be Jorge Risquet – a veteran of the 1965 Brazzaville mission and a trusted minion – who arrived on 3 December to take up the post of Chief of the Cuban Mission in Luanda, quickly becoming the official go-between with the *MPLA government.*[95] *These two men*

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Argüelles' career had he survived the conflict (he was killed in a land-mine explosion on 11 December, for details see below).

[92] Author's translation of 'Furry' in Báez, op. cit., p.26.

[93] García Márquez in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.56.

[94] 'Furry' later recalled: "Fidel followed the war in the minutest detail. He knew the theatre of operations to perfection. He would say to you: 'send so many tanks, mortars, AA machine-guns'. He knew where every squadron, every platoon was. And what's more, he had incredible vision" (author's translation of 'Furry' in Báez, op. cit., p.27). Ironically, the sycophantic manner in which senior officers in the FAR describe Castro's performance as a commander during the Angolan War – devoid of any criticism or personal reservations – actually undermines the image they are trying to portray. For far from suggesting that Fidel Castro was an enlightened and effective leader, their blanket adoration of the Supreme Commander merely enforces the impression that he was little more than the overbearing chief of a military system which bred obedient, politically-correct and toadying officers.

[95] In December 1975 Oscar Oramas was also sent to Luanda as Cuba's first Ambassador to Angola. Having already served as Cuba's unofficial Ambassador to Guiné from 1966-73, he was well known to MPLA stalwarts like Neto, Lúcio Lara and Lopo do Nascimento. According to Gleijeses ('Havana's

would play highly-influential roles in the Angolan War over the following decade and a half, and along with other Cuban officers such as Rafael Moracén Limonta and Úlises Rosales del Toro would make their professional reputations in Angola, all but one of them (Risquet) rising to prominence in the Cuban government following the Cuban withdrawal.[96]

## The Cuban sealift to Angola

On 27 November – two days after 'Furry''s arrival in Angola – the first Cuban troop ship docked in Luanda, and this was followed by two others on 29 November and 1 December respectively, bearing a total of 1,200 combat troops, with all their weapons and supplies, several troops of tanks and various artillery pieces.[97] Over the next four months these three ships would be followed by an assortment of Cuban transports and cargo ships, making a total of forty-two round trips in which they transported over 16,000 men and hundreds of tons of equipment and supplies to Angola.[98] Much of the heavy equipment destined for the FAPLA – such as T-34/54 tanks, BM-21 missile-launchers and B-10 guns – was sent directly from the Soviet Union to Luanda (so as to avoid inevitable transhipment delays in Cuba),[99] where it was directly handed on to Cuban military personnel who then instructed their Angolan allies in its

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policy in *Africa, 1959-76*', *op. cit.*), Risquet would be above Oramas in seniority but equal to 'Furry' who retained overall control of the mission in Angola.

[96] 'Furry' went on to become Chief of MININT – one of the most senior positions in the Cuban government – while Rosales del Toro is currently Chief of Sugar Production, Cuba's principal export. Only Risquet failed to make the grade, falling from grace in July 1988 when he was removed from the Cuban negotiating delegation (see Chapter 11), and finally being removed from the PCC's Central Committee in October 1991.

[97] Dates and figures according to Jorge Risquet (in Jaime *& Barber, op. cit., p.344). Brig.-Gen.* Orlando Almaguel Vidal (in Báez, op. cit., p.206) dates the arrival of the second ship (the Vietnam) a day earlier, mentioning that it had over 800 men on board, which would suggest that the majority of the tanks and heavy artillery were aboard the other two ships.

[98] See next chapter for a discussion of how many Cuban troops were sent to Angola.

[99] Heavy weapons destined for the FAPLA were flown or transported by sea from Eastern Europe via East Germany, Cape Verde and Conakry. During the 'Second Liberation War', Russian, Bulgarian and Yugoslav ships unloaded hundreds of tons of equipment including T-34 & T-54 tanks, PT-76 amphibious tanks, BTR-152 armoured personnel carriers, BM-21 missile-launchers, 120mm mortars, 76mm heavy guns, B-10 guns, MiG-21 fighter-bombers (most of which were assembled in Luanda), helicopters, & numerous armoured vehicles. The CIA claimed that by the end of the 'Second Liberation War' the FAPLA-Cuban forces in Angola had 120 T-54 & T-34 tanks, 70 Soviet-made BRDM armoured personnel carriers, numerous BM-21s, 12 MiG-21s & 10 MiG-17s (Valdés in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.105 & Rey, op. cit., p.68).

use, often minutes before (or even during) battles.[100] Often FAPLA cadres would accompany Cuban tank and artillery units in an apprentice's role, assisting in the tank or gun's operation until they had mastered its controls, eventually taking possession of it at the end of the offensive.[101] This mammoth injection of Soviet war materiel would quickly begin to have an effect as more and more Cuban troops joined the burgeoning FAPLA units spreading out over Angola in December 1975, and as their numbers grew so did their competence. So enormous was the Cuban sealift that by February 1976 – with dozens of Cuban ships anchored in the Bay of Luanda – Neto is reported to have remarked: "It's not right. If they go on like that, the Cubans will ruin themselves".[102]

## The USA tries to hamper the Cuban airlift

The Cuban airlift, however, did not go as smoothly. Severely hampered by crippling technical limitations, the Cuban Air Force had between 7 November and 9 December managed an impressive total of seventy reinforcement flights to Luanda, but this was only achieved by using a less-than-ideal route (via Barbados, Bissau and Brazzaville), pushing their ageing aircraft to the very limits of their capacity and range, and forcing their limited number of pilots to fly often dangerously-long hours.[103] The Cuban commanders were clearly prepared to take extreme measures in order to maximise both the size and speed of forces being sent to Angola, even if this meant Cuban troops loading their weapons and removing explosives and missiles from their

[100] According to García Márquez (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.44), during the confrontation at Catengue the FAPLA recruits had had so little training that their Cuban instructors were forced to shout instructions at them during brief lulls in the fighting.

[101] In Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.46), FAPLA Comandante Ndozi recalls how he was trained in action by the Cubans: "In my column the majority of Cubans were tank crews though we had some logistics experts and some artillery gunners and seamen for the boats. From January onwards we started training Angolans in the tanks so that for every tank crew of five there were three Cubans and two Angolans learning. By the time we reached the frontier the Angolans were driving!" Helmoed-Römer Heitman (War in Angola: The Final South African Phase, Ashanti Publishing, Gibraltar, 1990, p.233) notes that in tanks with mixed FAPLA-Cuban crews the tank commander and gunner were usually Cuban and the rest of the crew Angolan.

[102] Quoted by García Márquez in Deutchman, op. cit., p.41.

[103] Pilots who were normally restricted to 70 flying hours per month ended up doing 200, one pilot allegedly flying the entire fifty-hour round trip without a rest. "There are moments when you cannot possibly get more tired than you already are", he commented dryly. The ageing Britannias were patched up with brakes from Il-18's (Soviet heavy transport aircraft), and often carried loads of 194,000 lbs when the safe maximum was only 185,000 lbs (García Márquez, op. cit., p.51).

protective cases before the flight so as to lighten the load. The fragility of the airlift was quickly recognised by the American government, however, and sensing a weakness in Operation Carlota which could be exploited to their advantage, on 9 December President Ford called a meeting with the Soviet Ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, in which he asked the Soviets to suspend the airlift (wrongly assuming it was a Soviet-run operation at this point, which was not the case).[104]

By this stage Operation IAFeature was in serious trouble, and following the defeat at Quifangondo the Americans had started to adopt increasingly desperate (and ultimately counter-productive) measures to hinder Operation Carlota's successful conclusion. By late November 1975 the Congressional Committees' investigations into covert CIA activity abroad were reaching their climax, and with the FNLA disintegrating as a military force before their eyes, IAFeature's chiefs had resorted to drawing up fanciful $100 million military aid programmes in the full knowledge that Congress would never authorise the funding.[105] When they went to Kissinger on 2 December to discuss escalating the war in Angola in a last ditch attempt to save the FNLA, he showed no interest, leaving for a meeting in Beijing without commenting on their proposal.[106] The 40 Committee decided to wait until his return before taking any further action, but the truth was that by 2 December it was already too late to prevent a Cuban victory in the north against the FNLA. Three days later, the CIA's Deputy Director of Operations Bill Nelson was forced to admit to the Senate Foreign Relations committee that the CIA was sending arms directly to Angola, and in reaction they unanimously endorsed an amendment proposed by Senator Dick Clark

[104] Christopher Stevens, 'The Soviet Union and Angola', African Affairs 75, 229, April 1976, p.142. Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.103) notes that the flights were discontinued on 9 December, but makes no reference to the Ford-Dobrynin meeting.

[105] On 27 November President Ford had authorised the release of last $7 million in the CIA's Contingency Reserve Fund (which was used for covert operations abroad) for IAFeature, but by then it was far too little far too late. Ironically the very same day the first Cuban troop ship docked in Luanda, bearing significantly more military materiel (and troops) than the CIA's paltry $7 million budget increase could have afforded.

[106] According to Stockwell (op. cit., p.22), Kissinger merely grunted after reading the 40 Committee's proposals, although what he meant by this was unclear, leading to a bizarre (and fruitless) debate over whether it had been a 'positive' or 'negative' grunt.

to end the CIA's involvement in Angola.[107] Supported by two other Senators – John Tunney & Alan Cranston – the 'Clark Amendment'[108] was intended to prevent any further covert CIA activity in Angola by restricting the CIA's covert budget which formed part of the 1976 Defense Appropriations Bill then being debated in Congress.

Conscious that a vote on the amendment was imminent in the Senate, President Ford's request to Dobrynin was thus an attempt to sabotage the Cuban operation and give the FNLA more time to re-group and recover. That the Americans should have considered going to the Soviets to ask for help in restraining Cuba is a sign of what little influence they now had on the ground in Angola, but it appears that President Ford's threats that Cuban actions in Angola could jeopardise détente persuaded the Soviets – who had not authorised the operation in the first place – to restrain their Cuban allies, and the same day the airlift was suspended.[109] Coming at a critical moment for the Cuban commanders in Luanda – who had just launched their northern counter-offensive against the FNLA (see below) – the suspension of the Cuban airlift could have jeopardised the future of Operation Carlota. But it was to be another short-lived victory for the Ford administration, for ten days later the US Senate passed the 'Clark Amendment' by a 54-22 vote, effectively outlawing any further CIA involvement in Angola. Although the Defense Appropriations Bill still had to be passed by the House of Representatives (which did not vote until 27 January 1976) – and would not be signed into law by President Ford until 9 February 1976 – the Senate vote on 19 December convinced IAFeature's chiefs that the game was up, and after this date IAFeature assumed the character of a 'damage limitation' operation. With few remaining options left in Angola itself, the American government did about the only thing in its power to hinder the Cuban operation, and used diplomatic

[107] The committee was incensed into action by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Ed Mulcahy, who – unaware of Nelson's confession only minutes before – denied that any weapons were being sent into Angola. Caught in a lie, Mulcahy was forced to retract his statement and admit that arms were being directly to Angola, thus ensuring that the enraged committee endorsed the 'Clark Amendment'.

[108] Several writers also refer to it as 'the Tunney Amendment', although why Senator Cranston has failed to receive the honour of having the amendment named after him remains a mystery.

[109] No Cuban or Soviet source has made any reference to the Ford-Dobrynin meeting, or to subsequent Soviet pressure to suspend the airlift, but the coincidence of dates would tend to suggest that Ford's meeting did lead to some Soviet pressure on the Cubans, the Soviets perhaps ordering their flight personnel to stop assisting the Cubans. A week later the USA used diplomatic pressure to get Barbados to withdraw all landing rights to the Cubans, blocking that air route for good.

pressure to deny Cuba landing rights on all the possible routes Cuban aircraft could take.

For the next month – as Cuban forces in Angola climbed to over 10,000 – the American government successfully denied Cuba landing rights in half a dozen different countries, putting severe strain on Operation Carlota's logistics. Probably in response to the passing of the 'Clark Amendment' – which seemed to confirm that America was now bowing out of the Angolan War – on 24 December the Cubans resumed their airlift, attempting trial runs via Guyana. The runway was considered too short for the Britannias, however, and on 31 December after considerable pressure from the American government Georgetown withdrew Cuba's landing rights.[110] Cuba then tried flying from its easternmost airport – in Holguín, 480 miles east of Havana – to the Azores, before continuing on to Sal, Bissau (or Conakry), Brazzaville and then Luanda, alarming the Americans who had been operating their own NATO base in the Azores (in Lajes) since the Second World War. The decision by the Portuguese government to let Cuban aircraft land there probably reflected their general sympathy for the MPLA and their desire to see it succeed in an independent Angola, and initially the American government had to tread carefully in its efforts to get the landing rights withdrawn, conscious that the lease on their base needed to be renewed with the Portuguese every year. In the end, however, they resorted to bullying to get their way, and on 21 January Portugal gave in to their demands.[111] But it was to be another hollow victory for the American government, as by that date the Soviet Union had decided to give its full logistical support to the Cuban airlift.[112]

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[110] Valdés in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.104. According to García Márquez (in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.51-52), the American government pressured Texaco into refusing to sell fuel to the Cuban pilots, and when Cuban sent its own tanker "through some mysterious accident it became contaminated with earth and water", the implication being that the CIA sabotaged the tanker. The American Ambassador then allegedly threatened to bombard Georgetown airport if the Cubans continued to use it. No corroboration for this story has yet come to light.

[111] According to Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.104), the Americans blackmailed the Portuguese government, threatening to give massive support to various right-wing secessionist movements in the Azores if the Portuguese did not withdraw landing rights to the Cubans. Coming only weeks after Portugal had been forcibly expelled from one of its last colonies – East Timor, which was invaded by Indonesia on 7 December 1975 – the American ultimatum was no idle threat.

[112] On 12 January 1976 the Cubans did unilaterally discontinue refuelling stops in the Azores so as to present a more moderate image of the PRA during a vital OAU Summit in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), but they had resumed them by the time the rights were withdrawn on 21 January.

## The Soviet Union decides to give its full backing to the Cuban intervention

The Soviet Union had consistently refused to involve its military personnel in Operation Carlota since the Politburo first heard of its existence in early November, and throughout late 1975 it continued to hold back from escalating its involvement in Angola, merely continuing with previously-agreed weapons shipments. As the tide of battle started to turn in Cuba's favour, however – with victories in Cabinda, Luanda and Cuanza Sul – full support for Operation Carlota began to look more attractive. Having let the Cubans initially bear all the risks of failure,[113] the Soviets now found themselves in a position to step in and take over the logistics of Operation Carlota as a benevolent overseer, effectively adding a new Marxist African ally to the Soviet empire at almost no risk to themselves.[114] Keen to capitalise on this opportunity which Cuba had created in Angola, Soviet minds were decided by the passing of the 'Clark Amendment' which seemed to confirm that America was now effectively out of the running, and would be powerless to prevent a FAPLA-Cuban victory. Therefore in early January 1976 the Soviets agreed to provide Cuba with long-range Il-62s to bolster the airlift[115] – the first of which left Havana for Bissau on 9 January – and then on 16 January they signed a military protocol with the Cuban government, formalising their new military alliance in Angola.[116] Under the agreement the Soviets would not only supply all future weapons both for the FAPLA and Cuban troops, but they would also transport them directly to Angola, allowing the Cuban airlift to concentrate purely on transporting personnel to Angola. Although the promised

[113] These risks included the potential international outcry, the possibility of a military disaster occurring (this very nearly happened on several occasions), and the high casualties which could provoke serious domestic unrest.

[114] The Soviet leadership was doubtless encouraged by the almost unanimous outcry from African governments to the news that South Africa had invaded Angola, enabling the Soviets to intervene militarily in Angola with the implicit support of most of the regional powers.

[115] The Il-62 was capable of carrying over 200 men up to 6,400 miles without refuelling, a significant improvement on the Britannia which could carry at most 100 men for no more than a quarter of that distance. The Soviets also provided the Cubans with An-2, An-24, Il-14 & Il-18 heavy lift transport aircraft for the airlift (Blasier & Mesa Lago, op. cit., p.104).

[116] Gleijeses, 'Havana's Policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.. Although Gleijeses did not see a copy of the actual protocol which Jorge Risquet claims was signed on 16 January, he was given a copy of a letter written by Risquet to Fidel Castro on 29 January 1976, detailing discussions between himself, Furry, the head of the Soviet military mission in Luanda and Neto on arms deliveries, the text of which clearly confirms close Cuban-Soviet cooperation in weapons deliveries. See Appendix 1 for full text of letter.

assistance was to be characteristically slow in arriving,[117] the agreement signed in January 1976 formed the basis of the Cuban-Soviet military alliance in Africa, and would last almost until the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

While Cuban logistical officers were battling to keep the airlift operational, on 4 December FAPLA-Cuban troops finally launched their long-awaited counter-offensive against the FNLA in northern Angola.[118] The move was timed to coincide with Fidel Castro's opening of the PCC's First Party Congress (17 December), the Commander-in-Chief perhaps feeling that now military disaster had been averted he would make the most of Cuba's new-found military dominance in Angola. Shortly after 'Furry' arrived in Luanda Castro had therefore sent specific orders to launch counter-offensives in the north and south as soon as was practicable, anxious that the war be concluded before it turned into a protracted (and unpopular) struggle in the Angolan interior. The FAPLA-Cuban commanders opted for launching the northern offensive first, satisfied that the destruction of the bridges over the Queve river and the successful ambush at Ebo had stopped the South African advance in its tracks. But the Cubans had underestimated the determination of Foxbat's commander to exact revenge for Ebo, and before the northern offensive had advanced beyond its first objective (Caxito, captured on 4 December), Foxbat would inflict on the Cubans their most serious military set-back of the campaign, dramatically shifting the focus of the

[117] Until sufficient Soviet aircraft and staff were made available to the airlift, throughout much of early 1976 Cuba was forced to battle on with its ageing Britannias, in the face of predictable American attempts to deny the aircraft landing rights. Trial runs via Canada which started on 28 January were stopped two days later when landing rights were withdrawn (again under American pressure), and for a while the Cuban commanders contemplated flying non-stop from Holguín to Bissau, an extremely risky option. For the 3,500-mile journey was, in García Márquez's words, "a high-wire act without a safety-net, for on the outward journey the planes arrived with barely enough fuel for two more hours of flight, and on the way back, because of headwinds, they ended up with only one hour's fuel reserves". Once sufficient Cuban forces had started to arrive in Angola *it was decided to sacrifice capacity* for safety, and the Britannias were fitted with four extra petrol tanks inside the cabin, reducing the number of passengers by 30 but enabling the aircraft to fly directly to Sal with sufficient fuel reserves (op. cit., p.51).

[118] Date according to Brig.-Gen. Víctor Schueg Colás in chapter entitled 'Frente Norte' in Rey, op. cit., p.60. Puzzlingly, in the previous chapter of the same book (p.49) two other military writers claim that the offensive was launched on 15 November, perhaps trying to give the false impression that the Cubans had not wasted the opportunity for a rapid counter-attack against the demoralised enemy. In fact the Cubans had been very wise to withhold their counter-attack until their forces were sufficiently strong (there was still the threat from Zulu Force), and had they indeed gone ahead on 15 November as stated they would have reached Caxito within a couple of days at most, and not over a fortnight later (when it was actually captured).

war back to southern Angola and once more threatening to put the Cuban operation in Angola in jeopardy.

**Build-up to the 'Battle of Bridge 14'**

Since the ambush at Ebo on 23 November, Foxbat's commander had been making careful preparations for an attack over 'Bridge 14' on the Nhia river.[119] Aware of the bridge's importance in defending Quibala's southern defences, the FAPLA-Cuban commanders had set up their headquarters a few miles north of the river, positioning considerable forces in the area (including 'cuatro bocas' and BM-21s), some of which were sent to occupy the main hill overlooking the southern approach to the bridge (which the South Africans designated 'Top Hat').[120] The South African plan was to gradually drive all the FAPLA-Cuban forces out of the immediate vicinity of the bridge, then occupy 'Top Hat' and bring in South African engineers to repair the bridge under the cover of darkness in preparation for a dawn attack. In early December South African forces gradually infiltrated the area,[121] two artillery officers setting up an Observation Post (OP) on the summit of 'Top Hat' undetected. From the OP these officers were able to direct South African artillery onto various FAPLA-Cuban mortar and artillery positions, destroying several of them over the next few

[119] The main source for my account of the battle is 'The Battle of Bridge 14' by Richard Allport (http: www.rhodesia.myweb.nl samilhis.htm). Although undoubtedly biased in its viewpoint, it is the only detailed account of what happened that day, Cuban sources merely noting mutedly that a setback occurred but failing to give any details. *Cuban silence on the battle would tend to suggest that it was a* far more serious encounter than they were prepared to admit at the time.

[120] The Cubans' failure to completely destroy 'Bridge 14' may have been deliberate, for Castro had warned 'Furry' and Argüelles on several occasions not to blow up too many bridges in the defence of Luanda as this would slow down a subsequent Cuban counter-offensive. From South African accounts it appears that 'Bridge 14' could still be crossed on foot by patrols throughout December, and thus it seems likely that the Cubans deliberately refrained from totally destroying the bridge, merely occupying the area around it to prevent its capture. This decision was a serious mistake, *however, and* may be another example of how Castro's long-distance meddling in the war on the ground in Angola backfired.

[121] Shortly after the ambush at Ebo, Bravo sent a platoon of infantry and a couple of armoured cars under Sgt. Danny Roxo to reconnoiter the bridge. Leaving the armoured cars at a safe distance, Sgt. Roxo went ahead on foot to the bridge, unwittingly passing through a strong FAPLA position on the slopes of 'Top Hat'. After firing on several Cubans he saw on the other side, he then charged back through the FAPLA position, miraculously managing to do so unscathed. He claimed to have killed two Cubans and nine FAPLA soldiers, and was awarded the Honoris Crux (the SADF's highest decoration) for this action (Breytenbach, op. cit., pp.135-136). On 7 December another patrol was landed by helicopter on the northern side of Nhia, but they were quickly discovered and Sgt. Frederick Wannenburg was fatally wounded before they could be withdrawn (Richard Allport, 'The Battle of Bridge 14', op. cit.).

days.[122] Probably in response to the increased South African presence, the FAPLA decided to reinforce 'Top Hat' in expectation of a South African attack, but as the large contingent of FAPLA troops attempted to wade across the swollen Nhia river (probably on 8 December) they were spotted by the South African OP which directed heavy fire down onto them, allegedly causing devastating casualties.[123]

Although Cuban accounts make no mention of this disaster, it seems highly likely that it did occur, and its effect was to force the FAPLA-Cuban commanders to call off the offensive they had been planning to launch on 11 December, and instead order an immediate withdrawal from Ebo and the Nhia river. The withdrawal did not go as planned, however, and quickly turned to disaster when an armoured car bearing the Cuban commander Argüelles hit a land-mine as he was attempting to take a short-cut, killing him instantly and seriously wounding two others. The circumstances which led to Argüelles' death are unclear,[124] but the news was a devastating blow to the Cubans' morale and appears to have sewn confusion among their ranks only 24 hours before Foxbat launched its surprise attack. 'Furry' was immediately called down from Luanda to take over command of the front (he arrived the next day), and an improvised line of defence was set up north of Ebo to protect Condé and Quibala. In

[122] Allport (op. cit.) notes that a 'Katyusha' rocket position and an armoured car were destroyed by South African artillery (directed by the OP).

[123] According to Breytenbach: "The crossing [FAPLA] troops were caught bunching in the open with no overhead cover whatsoever. Literally hundreds were slaughtered", causing them to fall back "in disorder, virtually a rout" (op. cit., p.142). Allport notes that the bombardment created "havoc amongst the surprised enemy, the continuously exploding shells killing many of them" (op. cit.). Neither South African account gives a date for the alleged incident. No Cuban or FAPLA source makes any reference to this disaster, but given Foxbat's ease in occupying 'Top Hat' two days later the story does not seem implausible.

[124] García Márquez (op. cit., p.55), gives the following account: "On December 11 at Hengo, where a strong FAPLA offensive was underway against the South African invaders, a Cuban armoured car with four commanders on board ventured on to a track where sappers had previously detected a number of mines. Although four vehicles had already passed through safely, the sappers advised the armoured car not to take that particular route, whose only advantage was to save a few minutes when there seemed to be no need for great haste. Hardly had the car started on the track when it was blown up by a mine. Two commanders of the Special Forces battalion were seriously wounded. Raúl Diaz Argüelles... was killed on the spot". Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.42) state that Argüelles was killed on the track road from the Nhia to Hengo, while Concepción (op. cit., p.162) claims that he was killed as his armoured car crossed the bridge over the river Calengue. Unfortunately none of these accounts match up, but it seems unlikely that Argüelles was returning from the Nhia river to Hengo as there was no direct way across the river to Hengo from the Cuban positions north of the river, unless he took the circuitous route via Quibala and Condé. Ultimately the exact circumstances which led to Argüelles' death remain unclear. A year later, on 2 December 1976, Castro posthumously promoted Argüelles to Brig.-Gen. in recognition of his contribution to the Angolan campaign.

the confusion caused by the sudden withdrawal and Argüelles' death, however, the Cuban commanders appear to have overlooked 'Bridge 14', probably concluding that a South African crossing of the Nhia river would be impossible. This was to prove a serious tactical error, for it enabled Foxbat to move in and occupy the south bank of the Nhia on 10 December, occupying 'Top Hat' the next day without resistance. On the night 11/12 December South African engineers successfully re-built the bridge using Bluegum logs from the nearby forest, and the following morning at first light the attack was launched.[125]

## The 'Battle of Bridge 14', 12 December 1975

Kruys planned the assault in three waves, one company of infantry supported by Eland armoured cars driving the main FAPLA-Cuban force back towards Cassamba (5 miles to the north) while a second company attacked an artillery concentration and ammunition dump (which they referred to as the 'kraal'), and a third captured the hill positions north of the river. All three companies would then link up with the armoured cars for a final push towards Cassamba. According to Allport, there were over 1,000 FAPLA-Cuban troops on the other side of the Nhia, supported by mortars, 'cuatro bocas' and BM-21s, with Sagger anti-tank missiles covering the road along which Foxbat would be advancing. The total South African force numbered perhaps 300 men, with up to a dozen armoured cars leading the attack.[126] There was a heavy mist on the morning of 12 December, and once it had cleared the South African artillery began its preliminary bombardment, allegedly wiping out several Cuban mortar positions and FAPLA ammunition trucks north of the river. At 7am the main force then sped across 'Bridge 14', the armoured cars quickly deploying 100 yards on either side of the road so as to confuse the Cuban Sagger anti-tank missile crews

[125] Premature efforts to re-build the bridge on 10 December were abandoned after two South African engineers were killed during heavy FAPLA-Cuban shelling. The following morning a patrol of infantrymen and sappers were sent over the bridge to clear the road to the north of mines, but they quickly ran into a Cuban patrol, which they drove off for the loss of one killed and one wounded. A FAPLA patrol then turned up (which the South Africans claim to have destroyed) and the fighting lasted until dark, one South African officer swimming the Nhia three times to get help for the wounded man, who later died in Cela.

[126] Allport's figures for the South African force may seem surprisingly low, but there are many instances in the Angolan War of risibly small South African forces taking on opponents many times their size (see the 1987/8 campaigns in Chapters 10 & 11).

which had trained their weapons on the centre of the road. Taken by surprise, the FAPLA-Cubans put up only weak resistance, and their retreat turned into tragic farce when a Soviet truck loaded with 20 Cuban soldiers mistook one of the South African Elands for a Cuban armoured car, and indicated that it wanted to overtake. Slowing down to let the truck pass, the Eland's commander then slammed a 90mm shell into its rear, killing all the occupants.

As the one-sided battle progressed, South African encounters with Cuban troops took on a surreal quality, one Eland commander claiming to have run into a group of Cuban soldiers who were smoking marijuana in an abandoned farmhouse. According to him, the intoxicated Cubans clambered recklessly over his Eland (which was out of ammunition), allowing him to shoot eleven of them through the turret hatch with his pistol.[127] Foxbat's second company quickly occupied the 'kraal' which FAPLA-Cuban troops had abandoned shortly after the South African bombardment began, capturing a large amount of weaponry and ammunition which had been left behind.[128] The first and second companies then joined up (the third company was delayed after an important UNITA commander was wounded in the fighting) and they advanced rapidly northwards, quickly passing their original objective of Cassamba. By now news of the potential military collapse south of Quibala had reached MMCA, and it was considered serious enough for 'Furry' to drive down to Quibala immediately to personally take charge of the Cuban defences. A Cuban tank company and two FAPLA infantry companies which had been held in reserve there were sent to the Catofe river (10 miles south of Quibala) to hold the last remaining bridge between the South Africans and Quibala, and by 1pm they had established a new defence line in the area, expecting an attack at any moment.

A last stand at the Catofe river was not in the end necessary, however, for around midday the South African commander decided to call a halt to the attack, anxious that

[127] The truth of this story is impossible to ascertain, but I have decided to include it for its sheer bizarreness.

[128] Brig.-Gen. Orlando Almaguel Vidal later noted (in Báez, op. cit., p.208) that only a few hours before the South African attack was launched all the 122mm rockets which were being stored in a cattle shed (possibly the same place where the Cubans smoking marijuana were found) were moved further north, saving them from capture.

his small force might overextend itself and fall victim to a Cuban counter-attack. The operation had been conceived as nothing more than a raid, after all, and there were no reserves to keep up the attacks' momentum and turn the FAPLA-Cuban retreat into a full-scale rout. Cmdt Kruys had some difficulty explaining this to his gung-ho Eland commanders who – flushed with the morning's success – were determined to go the whole way to Quibala, but they were eventually reined in and Foxbat spent the rest of the day consolidating its gains while engineers continued their repairs on 'Bridge 14' under sporadic mortar and 'Katyusha' fire. During the fighting Foxbat had lost four men killed, with perhaps a dozen wounded. FAPLA-Cuban losses are still hotly disputed, but it seems likely that anywhere between fifty and one hundred Cubans were killed, with even greater losses among their FAPLA allies.[129] By the end of the battle Foxbat's forward elements had come within three miles of the Catofe river bridge, the capture of which would have ensured the fall of Quibala and put the entire Cuban southern defence plan in jeopardy. It had been a very close run thing, but ironically total disaster had been avoided not by Cuban actions but by those of the South African leadership in Pretoria which by this stage was deeply divided over the future of Operation Savannah, and was seeking to rein in Foxbat at the very peak of its success.

## Pressure grows on South Africa to withdraw from Angola

When on 10 November President Vorster had agreed to Savimbi's requests for *Zulu* Force to remain in Angola the military situation had favoured the South Africans, and imminent OAU negotiations (expected to start shortly after the 9 December emergency meeting) seemed likely to put a stop to the fighting before the end of the

[129] The only available casualty figures for the FAPLA-Cubans are provided by writers ideologically-opposed to the MPLA, and should be treated with some scepticism. Allport (op. cit.) & Steenkamp (op. cit., p.54) claim that over 400 FAPLA-Cuban soldiers were killed in the fighting, among them Argüelles himself (both claims seem doubtful). Steenkamp further notes: "the exact number [of FAPLA-Cuban dead] will never be known because the bush was so thick that enemy dead and wounded were being found for days afterwards, while the BBC reported at the time that loads of corpses and wounded men had been ferried away by the MPLA". Bridgland (op. cit., pp.149-150) claims that 200 were killed on 12 December, and 50 two days later in a further battle north of the Nhia. Viney (op. cit., p.49) puts the total dead at 200. Although all of these estimates may be inflated, it is clear that significant casualties (i.e over 100) were inflicted on the FAPLA-Cubans that day, and Risquet's assertion (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.345) that Foxbat "didn't cause us heavy casualties" is not credible.

year. By mid-December, however, the political and military situation had changed radically, and two opposing factions had emerged in the South African leadership, paralysing Pretoria's decision-making process. One faction – spearheaded by Gen. Viljoen – was in favour of immediate withdrawal, recognising that not only had South Africa's blatant intervention in Angola caused international outrage, but also that the tide of battle was turning against South Africa's allies, the FNLA and UNITA.[130] More alarmingly, the US Senate had begun debating the Clark Amendment, and Viljoen's faction was convinced that it was only a matter of time before the USA withdrew all support for Operation Savannah, leaving South Africa isolated in a potential African Vietnam.[131] The opposing faction – which included President Vorster and Gen. Van Heerden – was determined to stick it out in Angola, however, convinced that not only were the majority of African countries in the OAU still divided over Angola, but that Zulu Force's presence there was essential to ensure the FNLA and UNITA equal status with the MPLA in the peace negotiations which they believed would follow. It was a classic case of Pretoria's "proclivity for making tactical decisions and avoiding strategic ones" (as Crocker later put it),[132] and the resulting compromise was – unsurprisingly – counter-productive.

Postponing the inevitable decision to withdraw from Angola, Pretoria ordered Zulu Force and Foxbat's commanders to suspend all further attacks and concentrate instead on consolidating the gains already made.[133] This decision was an implicit admission of the failure of Operation Savannah, for not only did Pretoria now rule out the capture of the capital – the goal of any intervention force – but it effectively handed

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[130] The full scale of the military disaster at Quifangondo was brought home to Pretoria after Roberto's principal military advisor – Brig. Ben Roos – and his team were evacuated from northern Angola on 28 November. Coupled with the dispiriting set-back at Ebo five days earlier, this news probably influenced the pessimistic view of the military situation in Angola voiced by the SADF Chief Admiral Biermann at a detailed off-the-record briefing he gave to foreign journalists in Pretoria on 1 December (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.53).

[131] According to Geldenhuys (op. cit., p.54), the passing of the Clark Amendment was the turning-point in Operation Savannah, convincing Pretoria that withdrawal was now unavoidable. As he puts it, "[t]he South African position was that it was not prepared to protect Western interests alone". Geldenhuys is not entirely right, however, as Pretoria would not give the final order to withdraw for a further month.

[132] Crocker, op. cit., p.111.

[133] The change in strategy was delivered in person by Lieut.-Gen. Magnus Malan who visited Cela on 15 December and informed the South African commanders that although they would now be receiving no further reinforcements, they were expected to capture and hold as much territory as possible with the troops at their disposal.

the military initiative back to the FAPLA-Cuban commanders, allowing them plenty of time to recover from the set-back at 'Bridge 14', reinforce massively and prepare a counter-offensive.[134] News of the change in plan (which appears to have been made around 10 December) did not reach Foxbat's commander in time, however, and ironically he went ahead with South Africa's most successful attack of the war in direct violation of his superiors' orders. But Pretoria's change in strategy ensured that his success was short-lived, and the brief window of opportunity created at 'Bridge 14' quickly disappeared as the Cubans brought in reserves to shore up their defences. The failure to capitalise on the victory at 'Bridge 14' would prove to be the first in a long series of lost opportunities by Pretoria, and painfully demonstrated how a divided leadership with changing (and often conflicting) agendas would undermine – time and again – South African success on the battlefield. Lauded by the SADF after the war as Operation Savannah's greatest military victory, the 'Battle of Bridge 14' thus achieved no strategic or tactical gain whatsoever – more resembling a punitive expedition than a tactical advance – and although it may have comforted Foxbat's commander's bruised ego its only tangible result was to leave both sides eager for a second round.

**Castro's triumphal 'First Party Congress', 17-22 December**

News of the disaster at 'Bridge 14' must have caused some consternation in Havana as it came only five days before Castro was due to open the long-awaited PCC's First Party Congress. Expecting to announce the victorious advance of Cuban forces into northern Angola, Castro once again found himself facing a potential military disaster involving perhaps hundreds of Cuban casualties, among them the operation's commander. His reaction was characteristically robust, and after severely reprimanding the commanders on the ground (the late Argüelles no doubt proving a useful scapegoat for all concerned), he ordered the immediate launch of 'Operation 1st Party Congress', a counter-offensive against Santa Comba. Once again luck was on Castro's side, and two days after the Party Congress opened the US Senate passed the 'Clark Amendment', enforcing the American government's withdrawal from the

[134] One of the Cubans' first actions was to mine the roads from Sanga (40 miles to the south-east) and

Angolan war. This news – coupled with Foxbat's failure to follow up its victory at 'Bridge 14' – enabled Castro to close the Congress on 22 December with a triumphant announcement that Cuban internationalist troops were fighting – and winning – against the South Africans in Angola. No mention was made of the setback at 'Bridge 14', however, and to this day Cuban accounts spuriously maintain that the battle occurred not at the Nhia river but at the Catofe river ten miles to the north, thus avoiding having to make any reference to Cuban casualties sustained that day.[135] The Congress was Castro's crowning achievement after four long years of chaotic 'Sovietization', and rubber-stamped his position not only as Cuba's absolute leader but – with news of the victories in Angola – as one of the Soviet Union's most important allies.

With future American support now suspended indefinitely – and Soviet aid to the Cuban operation about to mushroom – the tide had turned against South Africa, and a last-minute visit by Savimbi to Pretoria on 20 December to beg President Vorster to further postpone the withdrawal fell on deaf ears. Finally on Christmas Day 1975 Major-Gen. Viljoen flew to Cela to inform Savimbi and Chipenda that South African forces would start withdrawing from Angola on 3 January 1976.[136] In pure military terms the South African advance had come to a halt anyway, all attempts by the other Battle-Groups – Orange and X-Ray – to extend the war into the Angolan interior

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the Medunda hills (north of Santa Comba) to Catofe (Ortiz, op. cit., p.58).

[135] Some Cuban sources make oblique references to a military setback of some sort on 12 December, but are frustratingly coy about details. García Márquez (op. cit., p.56) is the most truthful, describing the battle as "perhaps the biggest setback of the war" and concluding that an "[a]nalysis of the incident shows it to have been the result of a Cuban error". Brig.-Gen. Orlando Almaguel Vidal admits that "some errors were committed, principally through lack of experience, and Colomé ['Furry'] criticised us for them" (author's translation from Báez, op. cit., p.208), but gives no other details. In the official history of the war (Rey, op. cit., p.84), Brig.-Gen. Romárico V. Sotomayor García states that South African infantry and armour penetrated the Cuban line of defence at Catofe, leading to a new line being set up which held the South Africans three miles south of the river. Like Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.345), Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.42) & Ortiz (op. cit., p.58), he tries to give the false impression that the battle was fought just south of Catofe, thus avoiding discussion of the catastrophic losses sustained by the FAPLA-Cuban forces at the Nhia river earlier in the morning. No mention of any Cuban casualties is made in any of the above accounts.

[136] Chipenda was allegedly reduced to tears, begging the South Africans not to leave them to the mercies of the MPLA and Cubans, but Savimbi is said to have taken the news stoically, arguing that it had been the South Africans' decision to intervene in the first place, and that it should also be theirs when they decided to withdraw (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.57).

having been forced to turn back by destroyed bridges.[137] As if to underline the timeliness of the South African decision, the day before Viljoen arrived in Cela tensions between Pretoria's unwilling allies finally erupted in Benguela, machine-gun and mortar duels between groups of FNLA and UNITA troops leaving dozens dead.[138] With their Angolan alliance in pieces, their FAPLA-Cuban opponents rapidly growing in strength, and any further reinforcements vetoed by Pretoria, the South Africans chances of success in Angola were non-existent, and as early as 11 December – the day before Foxbat launched its surprise attack over 'Bridge 14' – Bravo had started to withdraw from Santa Comba towards the Namibian border. Despite sporadic attempts to delay the inevitable over the next few weeks, the South African withdrawal from Angola had effectively begun.[139]

## Cuba launches a counter-offensive against the South Africans, January 1976

Following the set-back at 'Bridge 14', the FAPLA-Cuban commanders made great efforts to re-build their forces north of the Queve river, and by the time Jorge Risquet concluded a visit of the area on 30 December he was able to write optimistically to Castro that 'Operation 1st Party Congress' would shortly be underway.[140] The key to capturing Santa Comba and Cela – the offensive's initial objectives – would be to occupy the Tongo and Medunda hills situated 15 miles to the north, from where FAPLA-Cuban artillery could then bombard the towns. In recognition of these hills'

[137] On 5 December X-Ray had set off from Silva Porto (Kuito-Bié) for Luso (Luena), capturing Moxico's capital on 11 December, and three days later set out to capture Teixeira de Sousa (Luau), thus completing UNITA's control of the entire Benguela railway. However, on 20 December the South Africans discovered that the enormous railway bridge over the Lumeje river had been destroyed, requiring at least two months to repair, and they were forced to turn back. Orange was similarly frustrated, advancing rapidly northwards from Silva Porto on 8 December only to find the Salazar Bridge over the Cuanza river destroyed, blocking any advance on Malanje. Orange then attempted to link up with Foxbat, but its advance westwards was again blocked by the destroyed bridge over the river Pombuige (west of Cariango), and it withdrew to Mussende where it was to remain until all South African forces were withdrawn from Angola in late January 1976. Both forces played little further part in the war (Steenkamp, op. cit., pp.54-55).

[138] The next day – as Viljoen was flying to Cela – the fighting between UNITA and the FNLA spread to Huambo, leaving 25 people dead by the end of the day.

[139] Geldenhuys (op. cit., p.54) notes that the order to withdraw was only accepted under duress by the South African commanders in Angola who were convinced they had the upper hand in the war. The feeling that the South African forces had been denied their rightful victory ran deep in the SADF, and very probably contributed to the SADF's readiness to intervene in Angola on many more occasions throughout the 1980s.

[140] See Appendix 1 for text of letter.

strategic importance, Foxbat had driven FAPLA units off them in mid-November, and over the following month they were to change hands frequently as each side fought to dominate the area. On 17 December a Cuban force finally managed to capture the northern most – Tongo – naming it 'Congress Hill' after the PCC Party Congress which had opened that day in Havana. Two weeks later – after heavy fighting – they were then able to capture the Medunda hills, repelling several South African counter-attacks on New Year's Day in fighting which became so desperate that at one point the Cuban commander ordered his BM-21 batteries to fire directly onto a Cuban artillery OP on the hill's crest, after it had been surrounded by South African troops (the Cubans apparently took shelter in a nearby cave).[141] Both sides suffered significant casualties during the fighting, in particular from the South African 122mm guns and Cuban BM-21's,[142] but once the Cuban presence had been firmly established on the Medunda hills (around 17 January), the South Africans had little choice but to withdraw from the area.[143]

Pretoria still refused to face the inevitable, however, and after receiving confirmation that the long-awaited OAU Emergency Meeting on Angola would be going ahead shortly, on 3 January it postponed the South African withdrawal once more, banking on the OAU rejecting a motion to recognise the MPLA government in Luanda. Since arranging a short-lived truce between the warring movements at Mombassa in January 1975, the OAU had had little influence on events in Angola, and its president Idi

[141] The troops fighting on the Tongo Hills received a special message from Fidel Castro on 1 January 1976 (the 27th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution), comparing their exploits in Angola with those of previous black heroes of Cuba's Independence Wars such as Maceo, Crombet and Guillermón Moncada.

[142] According to Ortiz (op. cit., p.132), the South Africans suffered "one of their greatest defeats on the southern front" during the Medunda Hills battle, although he gives no details of casualties inflicted on them. Due to the 122mm gun's superior range to the BM-21, the Cubans used a variety of tactics to overcome this deficiency, one Cuban recounting that BM-21's were often put out in the sun to warm up the rocket tubes, thus increasing the weapon's range to that of the 122mm gun (Gen. Álvaro López Miera in Báez, op. cit., p.39).

[143] The exact date Foxbat withdrew from Santa Comba & Cela is unclear as no South African account makes any reference to it, merely noting (e.g. Steenkamp, op. cit., p.59) that the full withdrawal began on 23 January. Ortiz (op. cit., pp.59-60) puzzlingly dates the capture of both towns on 6 January, adding that the retreating South African forces blew up the bridge over the Queve river at Techirimba the following day as they withdrew. Rey (op. cit., p.243) dates the towns' capture on 17 January, Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.44) on 18 January, and Legum & Hodges (op. cit., p.58) on 21 January, any one of which dates might be the correct one. On balance it seems most likely that Santa Comba & Cela were captured by the FAPLA-Cubans around 17 January, possibly after South African forces had already withdrawn, but the possibility that Ortiz may be right cannot be ruled out.

Amin's efforts to exclude the MPLA from the OAU's peace talks in September had further undermined the organisation's legitimacy.[144] Nevertheless, the vote which was taken on 12 January in Addis Ababa was crucial for Pretoria, for if the FNLA and UNITA could rally enough African support to defeat it, South Africa could continue its occupation of southern Angola with the OAU's implicit support. The exact split of the vote – 22 for and 22 against (with 2 abstentions) – confirmed Pretoria's suspicion that Africa was still divided over Angola, but it was not the dead-heat it may have appeared on the surface as Ethiopia (which as the host country had abstained from the vote for diplomatic reasons) recognised the PRA government shortly afterwards, giving the MPLA the simple majority it needed to become a member of the OAU (which it did on 10 February 1976).[145] Pretoria's last hope had evaporated, and, after two weeks of procrastination, on 23 January it ordered the final and definitive withdrawal of South African forces from Angola.[146]

The withdrawal of South African forces from southern Angola marked the final turning point in the 'Second Liberation War', and was followed by the immediate collapse of UNITA and the FNLA as viable fighting forces. The South African withdrawal was carried out rapidly, and by 4 February 1976 the South African presence in Angola had been reduced to a rear-guard (numbering between 4,000 and 5,000 troops) no more than 30 miles north of the Namibian border.[147] The battle-hardened FNLA and Bushmen soldiers of Zulu Force also withdrew to Namibia where they were temporarily housed in SADF barracks, unaware of the vital role they

[144] On 23 September 1975 Amin had met with Mobutu and several FNLA and UNITA representatives in Kinshasa to discuss a peace treaty, but had not invited the MPLA. When a second meeting was then called one week later by the OAU 'Angolan conciliation committee' in Kampala, Neto refused to attend, having only been informed by Amin the night before (quite possibly a deliberate ploy to ensure Neto's absence from the talks).

[145] Idi Amin – whose open sympathy for the FNLA and UNITA was no secret – had been forced to rule that a simple majority vote would be sufficient to admit the PRA to the OAU, in recognition of the serious divisions within the organisation which were too great for a compromise solution to be reached.

[146] The two week delay between the OAU vote and Pretoria's final decision to withdraw may have been caused by a number of factors. Possibly Pretoria wanted to wait until Ethiopia recognised the PRA before withdrawing, or perhaps they held out one last hope that Kissinger might be able to extract some concessions from the Soviets during his meetings with Brezhnev in Moscow from 19 to 23 January. Kissinger's attempts to introduce Angola onto the talks' agenda were rebuffed by Brezhnev, however, who told him to take up the matter with the Cubans, and coupled with an OAU censure vote against South Africa on 22 January (which failed to condemn either Cuba or the Soviet Union), this appears to have convinced Pretoria that the withdrawal could be delayed no longer.

[147] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.59.

were to play in the Angolan war over the following decade.[148] Deprived of their most powerful military ally, the FNLA and UNITA were now no match for the combined FAPLA-Cuban forces – massively boosted by the Soviet air- and sealift which went into top gear around the same time – and from late January onwards the 'Second Liberation War' became a one-sided affair, the FAPLA-Cubans rapidly advancing towards the Zairian and Namibian borders in the face of only sporadic local resistance. The remainder of the war was fought on these two fronts, and for ease of analysis I have chosen to examine each front separately, although the events on both fronts occurred more or less simultaneously.

## The Northern Front, December 1975-March 1976

Within days of the victory at Quifangondo, the FAPLA-Cuban commanders had begun planning the northern counter-offensive against the FNLA.[149] Determined to definitively crush the MPLA's perennial adversary and permanently remove its presence from northern Angola, the Cubans planned a gradual advance northwards, seizing Caxito and then swinging westwards to capture the FNLA's vital airbases at Camabatela and Negage (90 and 23 miles south of Carmona [Uíge] respectively), after which the remaining northern strongholds – Carmona and São Salvador do Congo (Mbanza-Congo) – would be expected to fall easily.[150] For the offensive the FAPLA-Cuban commanders could initially draw on only two FAPLA battalions, supported by about 150 Cubans (who operated the various mortars, heavy guns and armoured cars in their possession), but as the offensive developed these forces would

[148] Battle-Group Bravo was later formed into 32 Battalion, often referred to as the 'Buffalo Battalion', which was to see plenty of action during the Angolan War. The *Bushmen soldiers of Battle-Group Alpha eventually became 201 Battalion which gained an equally fierce reputation for its many actions* in the Angolan War.

[149] According to the official Cuban version, all offensive operations were planned jointly by the FAR and FAPLA commanders, each bearing equal responsibility for their ultimate success (see 'Furry' in Rey, op. cit., p.68). However, it is quite clear from the information available that the overall strategic command of all the military operations undertaken rested with 'Furry' and Risquet in Luanda, and ultimately with Raúl and Fidel Castro in Havana.

[150] For my account of the 'Northern Front' I have drawn on the chapter written by the Cuban commander Div.-Gen Víctor Schueg Colás (in Rey, op. cit., pp.57-63), Ortiz (op. cit., pp.69-76), Raúl Valdés Vivó (Angola: Fin del mito de los mercenarios, Empresa de Medios de Propaganda, Havana, May 1976), author's interview with Roberto, Stockwell (op. cit., pp.243-246), Peter Tickler, (The Modern Mercenary: Dog of War, or Soldier of Honour?, Guild Publishing, London, 1987, pp.62-99) & Báez (op. cit., p.180).

grow, by its completion totalling twelve FAPLA and one Cuban battalions, with various companies of tanks and heavy artillery in support.[151] On 3 December Brig. Víctor Schueg Colás, a veteran of Che Guevara's 1965 Congo campaign and one of the original members of Argüelles' team, was placed in command of the offensive, and two days later – after re-building the bridges over the Bengo and Quipirí rivers – the combined force set out for its first objective, Caxito, 48 miles to the north.

The FNLA-Zairian forces facing them were by now, in Stockwell's words: "a demoralized, undisciplined rabble, out of control of their officers".[152] Roberto's Zairian allies – unreliable at the best of times – had effectively withdrawn from the war after the drubbing they had received at N'to and Quifangondo, and by the time the FAPLA-Cuban column approached Caxito only a few hundred FNLA troops were left defending the city.[153] Caxito was therefore captured the same day (5 December) without much difficulty, the FAPLA-Cubans taking 150 FNLA prisoners and seizing fourteen tons of weapons. It was then decided to avoid a direct advance along the main road from Caxito to Carmona – as the FNLA would be expecting this and would inevitably try to blow up as many bridges in its path as possible – and instead the FAPLA battalion in Lucala was ordered to make a flanking attack on Carmona from the south-east. In an effort to avoid a large FNLA holding force north of Lucala – which the FAPLA battalion had fought in late October – it marched directly east towards Duque de Bragança (Calandula, site of Africa's second highest waterfall) and then took the smaller road north to Luinga (only 30 miles from Camabatela). Approaching Luinga from the southeast the FAPLA-Cuban force was thus able to take the FNLA by surprise, quickly capturing the towns of Casule and Cateco before running into stiff resistance at Luinga itself.[154] After fighting off no less than three

[151] The two FAPLA battalions were initially supported by a reconnaissance company with 4 BRDM-2s (armoured personnel transports), one company of engineers, one service company, one BM-21 platoon (c. 20 Cubans), one GRAD-1P platoon, one 76mm gun platoon & one 82mm mortar platoon (Rey, op. cit., p.52).

[152] Op. cit., p.215.

[153] According to Hugo Rius (Angola: Crónicas de la esperanza y la victoria, Ediciones Políticas, Havana, 1982, p.76), the majority of the FNLA mercenaries had abandoned Caxito on 29 November, leaving only weak elements defending the city.

[154] While capturing Cateco Cangola, a FAPLA company was sent out to clear enemy positions on the FAPLA's right flank, but quickly fell into an ambush from which only 17 men escaped (suggesting that roughly 70 men were killed). According to Ortiz (op. cit., pp.70-71) a lone FAPLA soldier managed to drive off the FNLA with a single mortar bomb.

determined counter-attacks they nevertheless captured Luinga (around 27 December), putting Camabatela within their grasp.[155]

Described by the offensive's commander as the 'Key to the North', Camabatela was the FNLA's principal military airbase in northern Angola, and its capture would cut off the main logistical lifeline for the FNLA's military headquarters in Carmona, starving it of vast quantities of supplies and ammunition which could not be handled by the relatively small airfields at Negage and Sanza Pombo. Around 1 January 1976 a two-pronged attack was launched on Camabatela, the 1st FAPLA Battalion attacking from the south while the 2nd FAPLA Battalion marched north from Cateco and attacked it from the east.[156] The 1st Battalion quickly seized control of the town but was then pinned down by a determined FNLA counter-attack which lasted most of the day, turning into what Brig. Schueg Colás later described as "the most difficult battle of the offensive".[157] With its ammunition running low the situation became increasingly desperate for the 1st Battalion, and it was only saved by the timely arrival of the 2nd Battalion later that day, which after capturing the airport drove off the FNLA with a flanking attack.[158] By 3 January the first reinforcements had arrived – a Cuban tank company (with four T-62s) and a motorised infantry battalion – and that day they captured Negage in a lightning attack, inflicting over 140 casualties on the FNLA and advancing to a point only five miles south of Carmona itself.[159] However, the FAPLA-Cuban forces were not strong enough to capture Carmona that day,[160] and they dug in where they were for the night – fighting off an inevitable FNLA counter-

[155] According to Ortiz (op. cit., p.71), at Luinga the FAPLA suffered their first casualty from a mine (a common occurrence in almost any part of Angola to this day) when a FAPLA driver drove into a sign-posted minefield and blew up his truck and passenger (the driver survived).

[156] The dates on which Camabatela and Negage were captured are not mentioned in any Cuban accounts (e.g. Rey or Ortiz), although both date Carmona's capture on 4 January. If Negage had been captured the previous day (as Ortiz, op. cit., p.74, claims), then the attack on Camabatela probably occurred around 1 January 1976, although it could possibly have occurred a few days earlier. García Márquez's assertion (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.56) that Carmona was captured on 6 January appears to be wrong.

[157] In Rey, op. cit., p.61.

[158] Brig. Schueg Colás later said of the capture of Camabatela: "I believe that with that battle we won the war in the north" (in Báez, op. cit., p.180).

[159] Both Ortiz (op. cit., p.73) and Rey (op. cit., p.61) note that MMCA was anxious for Carmona to be captured before the OAU met in Addis Ababa, and had given Schueg Colás until 8 January to do so, hence the speed with which the offensive was pursued.

attack– before moving in to occupy the FNLA's capital the following morning (4 January).[161]

**The FNLA makes a final stand in northern Angola with foreign mercenaries**

The fall of Carmona was a devastating blow to the FNLA's international standing and signalled its total collapse as a fighting force in Angola. Now effectively abandoned by his principal backers – the CIA and Zaire – Roberto turned to the only remaining source of military power available to the FNLA: foreign mercenaries.[162] The decision to use mercenaries to fight the FNLA's war was not in itself unprecedented – indeed up until the battle of Quifangondo hundreds of ex-colonial Portuguese troops who could loosely be described as mercenaries had fought alongside the FNLA – but Roberto's decision to hire in British, French and American mercenaries in early 1976 was to have far more serious repercussions than he could have imagined at the time. For not only would the news cause outrage in many African states – some of which had painful memories of Mike Hoare's foreign mercenary army in the Congo during the early 1960s – but it would also undermine the legitimacy of the FNLA as an African nationalist movement, seeming to confirm its unpopularity and moral bankruptcy. Furthermore, the mercenaries Roberto ended up hiring – the majority ex-British Army – were poorly-motivated and undisciplined, and their callous and destructive behaviour in northern Angola would be a propaganda gift which the MPLA would exploit to the full. Far from turning the war back to the FNLA's advantage, the use of foreign mercenaries would only succeed in briefly delaying the

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[160] The reason for the FAPLA-Cuban force's weakness was that both the 1st and 2nd FAPLA Battalions had been left behind defending Negage and Camabatela respectively, and the 1st would not be freed up for battle until a 3rd Battalion had been formed at Camabatela to take over its garrisoning duties.

[161] Ortiz (op. cit., p.74) notes that the rapid FAPLA-Cuban advance from Camabatela took the FNLA by surprise, thus explaining the relatively easy capture of Negage and Carmona.

[162] The CIA had attempted to set up its own mercenary programme as part of IAFeature, but had met with little success. On 27 November 1975 President Ford authorised IAFeature's last $7 million in part to pay for the recruitment of 20 French & 300 Portuguese mercenaries for the FNLA. It was, in Stockwell's words, "a senseless gesture, but something, at least, to report to the 40 Committee". By late January all twenty French mercenaries had been flown to Silva Porto (Kuito-Bié), and two were killed in fighting before they were withdrawn. Col. Santos e Castro (the veteran of Quifangondo) was charged with recruiting the Portuguese mercenaries, but he failed to produce a single one (still at a cost of $570,000 to the CIA). In the end the entire mercenary programme cost over $2 million, roughly $100,000 for each mercenary the CIA managed to field in Angola (Stockwell, op. cit., pp.243-246).

FNLA's expulsion from Angola, and would in the process irreparably damage Roberto's reputation in Africa and the world.

In late 1975 the FNLA began recruiting British mercenaries through a bogus security company, the 'Security Advisory Service', based in Camberley, Surrey (the acronym 'SAS' no doubt designed to appeal to the soldier of fortune's tastes).[163] By late December 128 British mercenaries had been sent via Brussels to Kinshasa, and from there they were transferred to northern Angola. Their commander was Costas Georgiu – aka 'Col. Callan' – a Greek Cypriot who had served in the British Paras (and had done time in prison for armed robbery) before embarking on a career as a mercenary. Described by Roberto as a 'professional' who was 'perhaps a little headstrong', Callan was perhaps more accurately summed up by John Stockwell as a 'raving psychopath', and those who served with him were later to admit that his mercenary force constituted little more than "a loose band of bandits with a very dangerous leader".[164] With the fall of Carmona and the port of Ambriz under threat of imminent attack, the FNLA had little choice but to move its headquarters north to São Salvador do Congo (M'banza Congo), and Callan was called in to draw up a plan to defend this last FNLA foothold in Angola. Mixed mercenary and FNLA forces were sent to defend the FNLA's strongholds – the deep-water port of São António do Zaire (Soyo) which had an airstrip over a mile long, São Salvador and Maquela do Zombo (where Callan set up his headquarters) – while smaller groups of mercenaries were sent to patrol the area south of São Salvador, laying mines and setting up ambushes. With no more than 200 mercenaries and perhaps a few hundred dispirited FNLA soldiers at his disposal,[165] Callan's defence plan did not stand a chance, as by now his

[163] Ortiz, op. cit., pp.232 & 235.

[164] Roberto in interview, John Stockwell & un-named mercenary in 'Cold War', op. cit.. The mercenary went on: "We did kill when we had no particular reason to. We tortured to achieve information that they probably didn't have, and these were not captured enemy soldiers: they were probably just local civilians. And that atmosphere permeated its way through the whole unit". Roberto's idealised view of Callan seems to stem from a romantic notion he has of the British Army. When I interviewed him he spoke at great length of his admiration for the British and his conviction that they produced the finest troops in the world. How he manages to equate this view with Callan's murderous rampage through northern Angola remains a mystery.

[165] The quality of the FNLA troops by this stage is adequately demonstrated by a story told by John Barker (one of the mercenaries) after the war. According to him, Roberto entrusted 200 FNLA soldiers to him to be formed into three companies, but after three weeks so many had deserted that there was scarcely half a company left (i.e. c.50 men). These were then promptly annihilated in their first encounter with the FAPLA-Cubans (Valdés Vivó, op. cit., pp.83-84). Roberto (in interview) provides

paltry force was up against more than six battalions of FAPLA soldiers, supported by Cuban tank companies and heavy artillery.

**Callan grows more desperate as FAPLA-Cuban advance quickens**

On 11 January FAPLA-Cuban forces captured Ambriz and Ambrizete (N'zeto), immediately noting the presence of foreign mercenaries fighting among the FNLA. From there they planned to advance north-eastwards towards São Salvador (140 miles from Ambrizete) while a second force (which had captured Sanza Pombo on 9 January) converged on the FNLA capital from the southwest, capturing Maquela do Zombo en route (see map). The second column quickly advanced to Damba, and on 31 January ran into a group of mercenaries near Maquela do Zombo, allegedly killing 19 of them and wounding 16 in a furious battle.[166] The heavy casualties sustained by the mercenaries quickly undermined their morale – many of them having had very little (if any) battle experience – and that afternoon 23 mercenaries from a group which had just arrived in Maquela do Zombo refused to fight, eliciting a furious response from Callan who forced them to strip naked, confiscating their possessions and then leaving them under guard while he took his main force (numbering around 70 men) to the base camp. With FAPLA-Cuban forces known to be nearby tensions ran high among the detained mercenaries, and when that night a vehicle suddenly appeared unannounced they opened fire on it with machine-guns and anti-tank rockets, fleeing northwards towards São Salvador. Running into an FNLA detachment en route, they claimed that they had beaten off a massive FAPLA-Cuban armoured attack, but they were forcibly returned to Maquela do Zombo where they discovered they had actually hit and destroyed one of their own Landrovers (miraculously killing no one). Incensed by their incompetence and cowardice (they had immediately fled the town), Callan called over the mercenary who had fired the anti-tank rocket and shot him through the head at point-blank range, and then ordered the immediate execution of fourteen others.[167]

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an opposing view, claiming that after three weeks spent under Callan's instruction the FNLA troops were unrecognisable (i.e. highly-professional).

[166] Valdés Vivó, op. cit., p.86.

[167] There is much confusion over the exact sequence of events surrounding Callan's execution of fourteen mercenaries in northern Angola. I have used the most accurate version in Tickler (op. cit.,

This single callous act was to make Callan the most notorious war criminal of the 'Second Liberation War', and demonstrated just how desperate and crazed the fighting in northern Angola war had become by this stage. Roberto was shocked by the news (which was delivered to him by a horrified American diplomat in Kinshasa) and he flew down to Maquela do Zombo to see for himself, but was unable to locate Callan who had headed south to set up an ambush at Quibocolo (20 miles to the south). The ambush back-fired – quite literally – when Callan's bazooka round hit a FAPLA truck laden with mortars, missiles and ammunition, unleashing a devastating series of explosions which wounded him in the shoulder and leg, and killed three of his own men.[168] Carried to a hut by four mercenaries, Callan was then forced to flee north as the remainder of the FAPLA-Cuban column arrived, killing or capturing the surviving mercenaries, and within days he had been taken prisoner by the FAPLA-Cubans who determined to make their own example of him (see below). Keen to distance themselves from Callan, the FNLA leadership immediately stripped him of overall command and threatened him with a court martial in a bungled attempt to placate world opinion, but the FNLA's reputation had been irreparably tarnished and what little support remaining for Roberto's movement quickly evaporated. Remaining FNLA and mercenary resistance quickly crumbled – São António do Zaire was captured on 7 February, Maquela do Zombo three days later, and finally on 15 February São Salvador fell to FAPLA-Cuban forces, ending the FNLA's dominance of northern Angola.

The Cuban-led offensive against the FNLA in northern Angola was to be Operation Carlota's greatest single victory, and its one irreversible success. The FNLA – which for twenty years had been the MPLA's bitterest rival and on several occasions had looked set to take power in Angola – had been crushingly defeated in Angola by Cuba's highly-effective military intervention, and although sporadic FNLA activity would continue in northern Angola for another four years, Roberto would never again

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pp.76-87), while drawing some details from the more garbled accounts in Ortiz (op. cit., p.236), Stockwell (op. cit., p.224), Valdés Vivó (op. cit. p.84) and by Roberto himself (in interview).

[168] Valdés Vivó (op. cit., p.86) describes it as "a volcanic eruption followed by tremendous bursts of detonating explosives, within a phantasmagoric splutter of fireworks which went on for more than twenty minutes" (author's translation).

field such a large force (reportedly 25,000 men) nor obtain the backing of such powerful allies. Roberto's decision to use foreign mercenaries had been the last in a long line of political and military blunders which had started with his failure to advance on Luanda back in late October 1975, and what little African support he still had quickly evaporated as the full extent of the mercenaries' atrocities began to leak out. The vast majority of the mercenaries had volunteered for Angola under the delusion that they would see only sporadic fighting against a disorganised and demoralised enemy, and when faced with vastly superior professional Cuban forces they had been decisively outclassed on the battlefield.[169] Determined to make the most of the propaganda gift represented by the capture of thirteen of the mercenaries, the MPLA government eventually put them on trial in June 1976, sentencing nine of them to prison terms ranging from 16 to 30 years, and four of them – including the infamous Col. Callan – to death.[170]

The execution of Callan on 10 July – a man whose actions seemed to embody the greed, moral corruption and brutality of the West – was intended as a brutal rebuke to the FNLA,[171] and for the Cubans was in some part revenge for the humiliating defeat Mike Hoare's mercenary army had inflicted on Che Guevara and the CNL back in 1965.[172] With all remaining FNLA forces having fled over the border into Zaire and with Roberto's traditional areas of support now under FAPLA-Cuban military occupation, the FNLA's bid for power was effectively over, and Roberto would spend the next three years in a fruitless struggle to resurrect his liberation movement,

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[169] Valdés Vivó (op. cit., p.99) notes that over one hundred white mercenaries were killed during the fighting in northern Angola. Clearly none of them had expected to come up against a well-armed, highly-professional Cuban force, although Cuban propaganda is perhaps exaggerating somewhat when claiming that the myth of the invincibility of white mercenaries had been exploded by Angola as mercenary activity has continued unabated to the present day in Africa, much of it organized by Executive Outcomes (EO, now under the name of 'Branch Energy' in Angola).

[170] The sentences were as follows: Malcolm McIntyre, John Nammock, Gary Martin Acker (American), 16 years; John Lawlor, Colin Clifford Evans, Cecil Martin Fortuin, 24 years; Kevin John Marchant, Michael Douglas Wiseman, Gustavo Marcelo Grillo (American), 30 years; and Costas Georgiou 'Callan', Andrew McKenzie, John Derek Baker, Daniel Francis Gearhart (American), death by firing squad.

[171] According to Roberto (in interview), Callan was executed especially brutally by a group of soldiers who surrounded him and knifed him to death. The whereabouts of the four executed mercenaries' bodies are not known.

[172] Cuban bile against Callan's mercenary forces is vividly captured in Raúl Valdés Vivó's authorised account of the Northern Campaign, Angola: Fin del mito de los mercenarios (op. cit.), which contains many gruesome pictures of the mercenaries who never made it to trial.

steadily growing more isolated and anachronistic. Thus, with the FNLA vanquished in the north and with FAPLA-Cuban forces advancing in the south towards the Namibian border, the MPLA leadership could be forgiven for believing that the principal threats to its power in Angola had been removed. It would be some time before both the Cubans and Angolans recognised that in Savimbi's UNITA – backed by a South African leadership determined for revenge – they would find a far more determined and relentless enemy to worry about.

## The Southern Front, January-April 1976

Following Pretoria's final decision to pull out of Angola, on 23 January South African forces began a rapid withdrawal towards the Namibian border, handing over control of the many towns they had captured to UNITA and blowing as many bridges as possible behind them to slow down the inevitable FAPLA-Cuban pursuit. The FAPLA-Cuban commanders quickly recognised the military vacuum facing them in southern Angola and began an immediate advance on several fronts, anxious to seize the advantage before UNITA had time to regroup and dig in. The remainder of the 'Second Liberation War' therefore resembled an extended military manoeuvre rather than an intensive military campaign, as vast amounts of Cuban and FAPLA personnel and armour gradually moved into southern Angola in the face of sporadic and ineffective UNITA resistance. Cuban accounts have since sought to depict 'Operation General Antonio Maceo' – as the southern campaign was named – as a triumphant campaign against a demoralised South African opponent, but the truth was that between the start of the South African withdrawal on 23 January and its completion on 27 March there was almost no contact between the Cubans and South Africans, all of whom had withdrawn to within 30 miles of the Namibian border by 4 February.[173]

[173] One ex-FAR officer I interviewed claimed that a secret deal was struck between the Cuban and South African commanders – a 'gentlemen's agreement' as he termed it – under which the South Africans would be allowed to withdraw unmolested by the Cubans, provided they did so rapidly. No documented evidence has come to light supporting this claim, however, but the orderly nature of the South African retreat and the absence of any clashes with the advancing FAPLA-Cuban forces provide at least circumstantial evidence to support this claim (author's interview with ex-FAR officer, September 1997, Havana).

The Cuban advance southwards nevertheless faced enormous obstacles, the most immediate of which were the dozens of impassable bridges which had been blown up during the fighting, either by the Cubans themselves or by the retreating South Africans. The Queve river, which in November had proved such an effective first line of defence for the Cubans, now became the principal obstacle in their path, and throughout January frantic efforts were made to repair the main crossings at Caxoeiras and Techirimba so that Cuban tanks and armoured cars (which would be vital for defeating any large UNITA defensive positions encountered by the advancing forces) could join the advance. The engineering task facing the FAPLA-Cuban force was formidable – Cuban sappers having to rebuild no less than eight bridges in the Ebo and Nhia river area alone – and the advance was further delayed while sappers removed large numbers of South African landmines and booby-traps which had been laid during the retreat.[174] The first FAPLA-Cuban troops were ferried across the Queve at Massango (15 miles west of Santa Comba) in improvised rafts, quickly capturing Amboiva on 1 February and advancing on Cassongue. Then on 5 February Cuban engineers completed repairs on the massive Techirimba bridge, and a general advance southwards began on three fronts: along the coast from Novo Redondo (captured on 24 January) towards Lobito, from Techirimba towards Alto Hama, and from Mussende (captured on 26 December) towards Andulo.[175] The plan was to capture the main towns along the Benguela railway line, consolidate a defensive position there, and then move on to capture the remaining towns in Cunene and Cuando Cubango.

While the first two FAPLA-Cuban forces cleared pockets of UNITA resistance south of the Queve river (capturing Cassongue on 6 February), *the third advanced south* from Mussende, capturing Teixeira de Silva (Bailundo) on 5 February before moving on UNITA's capital – Nova Lisboa – which fell after heavy fighting three days later.[176] The fall of Nova Lisboa was a devastating blow for UNITA, which lost over

[174] Ortiz (op. cit., p.62) notes that during the advance southwards Cuban sappers removed 400 MK-7 anti-tank mines, 200 anti-personnel mines and 10 tons of explosives primed to destroy bridges.
[175] Cuban engineers were also brought in to repair the bridges at Pombuige and Cariango before the advance on Andulo could begin.
[176] Rey (op. cit., p.75) dates Nova Lisboa's capture on 8 February 1976, whereas Bridgland (op. cit., p.174) dates it a day later, probably erroneously. When FAPLA-Cuban forces captured Nova Lisboa

600 troops in the battle, and signalled its total collapse as a fighting force in Angola. Bereft of the highly-effective support of Zulu Force, Foxbat and Orange, UNITA could now only put up token resistance against the overwhelming forces ranged against it, and over the next fortnight its remaining strongholds would fall in quick succession to the relentless FAPLA-Cuban advance. With Nova Lisboa and Silva Porto now firmly under their control, the FAPLA-Cuban forces advanced east and west simultaneously, easily capturing the ports of Lobito and Benguela on 10 February,[177] and UNITA's last remaining military base at Silva Porto two days later. Sá da Bandeira and Moçamedes (UNITA's last remaining port) fell shortly afterwards,[178] and following the capture of Luso (on 14 February)[179] the FAPLA-Cuban Eastern and Southern Fronts were able to link up on 18 February, completing their control of the Benguela railway line. Having vowed never to leave the Angolan bush alive during his last meeting with a CIA officer on 1 February, Savimbi fled with the few hundred men left under his control to his last remote outpost – Gago Coutinho (Lumbala-N'Guimbo) in southern Moxico – and made preparations for a protracted guerrilla war, expecting the final FAPLA-Cuban assault at any moment.

At this point, however, the FAPLA-Cuban advance southwards came to an abrupt halt, and for the next few weeks the Cubans remained behind their defensive line – which ran from Moçâmedes on the coast through to Serpa Pinto (Menongue, captured

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they discovered documents at the Governmental Palace demanding payment from UNITA and the FNLA to pay for coffins for those killed in clashes between the two movements (Ortiz, op. cit., p.161). Bridgland (op. cit., p.161) notes claims by UNITA supporter Sangumba that the Cubans massacred women and children during the capture of Nova Lisboa, but offers no corroboration for the claim.

[177] According to Ortiz (op. cit., p.61), during the advance south from Novo Redondo towards Lobito, the FAPLA-Cuban force ambushed a UNITA battalion 12 miles north of the Canjala river, killing 70 of them and capturing 200 prisoners and tons of weaponry. UNITA blew up the bridge over the Canjala, however, and it had to be repaired before the advance could continue.

[178] It is unclear when exactly Sá da Bandeira and Moçâmedes were captured. Legum & Hodges (op. cit., p.58) and Steenkamp (op. cit., p.59) date their capture on 11 February, whereas Rey (op. cit., p.243) dates their capture on 16 and 17 February respectively.

[179] Cuban officers from the Saurimo CIR had been commanding FAPLA forces in eastern Angola since mid-December, and had successfully stopped X-Ray's advance on Teixeira de Sousa (Luau) by blowing the enormous bridge over the Lumeje river. By early January 1976 there were a total of two mixed FAPLA-Cuban infantry battalions under their command, supported by artillery and tanks, and in early February these set out to capture Luso which was defended by about 1,000 UNITA troops. Owing to destroyed bridges in the path of their advance, the FAPLA-Cuban column went via Luateche (which it captured on 4 February), occupying Buçaco a week later after a surprise attack over the Luxia river routed the defending UNITA force (24 were killed, 4 captured and one 106mm seized). Their morale broken, UNITA resistance melted away, and the FAPLA-Cubans occupied Luso on 14 February with little resistance (Rey, op. cit., pp.94-100).

on 24 February) in the east – making little attempt to advance south into Cunene. Moves were made to extend the FAPLA's control eastwards, both into Cuando Cubango (Cuito Cuanavale was captured on 28 February, Mavinga on 12 March) and Moxico, but no attempt was made to move into Cunene either from Lubango or Matala, despite the availability of forces for such a push. Cuban accounts give no explanation for this pause in the advance, but the reason appears to be that they had finally come within range of the South African rearguard, and the Cuban commanders – who still had painful memories of the disaster at 'Bridge 14' – were probably keen to avoid a direct confrontation with the SADF unless absolutely necessary. Although Cuban accounts have since claimed that the South Africans were forcibly driven back towards the Namibian border, the reality was that the rapid Cuban advance south from Quibala – which had covered nearly 400 miles in a little over three weeks – had only been possible because of a total absence of South African forces in the area, and once these forces were within range the Cuban commanders preferred to hold back, waiting for the South Africans to complete their withdrawal before advancing any further.

The advance against Savimbi's last stronghold – Gago Coutinho – nevertheless continued, and on 17 February two FAPLA-Cuban columns set out from the newly-captured Luso, expecting to reach the town within a few days. However, their progress was severely hampered by countless blown bridges which UNITA had destroyed in its retreat,[180] and it was not until 13 March that Gago Coutinho was finally reached. Cuban MiG-21s – making their first combat appearance in Angola – bombed the airfield prior to the assault, destroying an F-27 which the CIA had borrowed from Mobutu, and this convinced Savimbi that he was not only outnumbered but outgunned.[181] Before abandoning Gago Coutinho, however,

[180] The FAPLA-Cuban advance was almost immediately halted at the Lungué-Bungo river, and repairs on the bridge took until 21 February. The advance then halted again at the Luzi river bridge, which took until 27 February to repair.

[181] The loss of Mobutu's F-27 was a major embarrassment for IAFeature's Chiefs as the deal struck with Mobutu to lend it to UNITA had not been authorised by the 40 Committee. IAFeature's Chiefs had been forced into bargaining with Mobutu as they had been unable – despite exhaustive efforts – to buy or even hire a suitably large aircraft for shifting men, weapons and supplies for UNITA in eastern Angola. The timing of the aircraft's destruction was particularly awkward, as only the day before (on 12 March 1976) the new CIA Director, George Bush Sr., had sent a cable to all CIA stations ordering that no further funds whatsoever were to be spent on IAFeature, and the destroyed aircraft would cost at least $½ million to replace. Mobutu outrageously demanded $2 million for the aircraft, but after bargaining was persuaded to take $600,000. Eventually, on 28 April 1976 a CIA agent delivered

Savimbi ordered the execution of seventeen Cuban prisoners who had been captured by UNITA during the previous five months' fighting. Accusing five of rape, the rest of murder, they were shot by an all-woman firing squad only hours before their comrades captured the town, this callous act calculated to undercut the Cuban victory and demoralise the soldiers who found the bodies.[182] It was by no means the first atrocity committed by UNITA during the war – the MPLA later alleged that UNITA had massacred hundreds of MPLA sympathisers in Silva Porto, Lobito and Porto Alexandre (Tômbua) before it withdrew[183] – but it contributed to the ruthless reputation which the 'kwacha' (as the UNITA guerrillas were nicknamed) were to earn over the following years as the guerrilla war intensified.[184] Gathering his remaining forces together – which according to some accounts numbered no more than 78 guerrillas[185] – Savimbi headed off into the Angolan bush, vowing to continue his seemingly hopeless struggle against the MPLA and its powerful allies alone.

The FAPLA-Cubans made timid moves southwards from Lubango in early March – occupying Tchibemba on 9 March and Virei two days later – but they still refrained from entering Cunene where the bulk of the remaining 5,000-man South African force was stationed. The reason South Africa still refused to withdraw its last remaining men – despite Pretoria's obvious desire to end Operation Savannah once and for all – was the same one which had motivated its original incursion into Cunene in early August 1975: the Calueque hydroelectric scheme. Paranoid that a hostile MPLA

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nearly $2 million to Mobutu in cash, which included money for Roberto and Savimbi as well as compensation for the lost F-27. Unsurprisingly, Mobutu pocketed the lot (Stockwell, op. cit., pp. 242-246).

[182] The execution of these Cuban prisoners was noted in Fred Bridgland's book 'A Key to Africa' (op. cit., pp.191-192), but was considered controversial enough to be censored from all Cuban accounts of the war by the Cuban authorities. At the time Savimbi said of his decision, somewhat disingenuously: "It is not with pleasure that I report the execution of Cubans because I was one of the closest friends of Che Guevara". Given what is now known about Savimbi, both claims strain credibility.

[183] According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., pp.49-50), on the night of 9/10 February 1976 UNITA massacred dozens of MPLA supporters in Silva Porto's main jail, burying them in a mass grave which was discovered by FAPLA forces the following day. The MPLA later estimated that up to 700 civilians were killed during the FNLA-UNITA occupation of Moçâmedes, and 150 MPLA sympathizers in Porto Alexandre. The UNITA chief in Lobito – Jorge Valentim – was accused after the war of having authorized the execution of over 500 civilians during the UNITA occupation. One FAPLA unit even claimed to have found refrigerated jars of human viscera and blood in the home of a UNITA minister which he had taken from victims he had eaten (García Márquez, op. cit., p.55).

[184] 'Kwacha' is the Umbundu word for 'cockerel', a reference to the motif on UNITA's flag (a black cockerel) and possibly also to UNITA's radio station which was called the 'A Voz da Resistência do Galo Preto' ('Voice of Resistance of the Black Cockerel').

government might shut down, even demolish, the Calueque installations – which provided power and irrigation to vast swathes of northern Namibia – the South Africans refused to complete their withdrawal until they had cast-iron assurances that Calueque would continue to operate as it had done under the Portuguese. Finally on 18 March the MPLA guaranteed to the UN that it would not damage the Calueque installations, and that it was prepared to negotiate their operation with the South African government.[186] This move (and possible behind-the-scenes diplomacy) appears to have been sufficient to quell remaining South African reservations, and on 27 March the last elements of Zulu Force withdrew across the border into Namibia, watched by Magnus Malan, Major-Gen. Viljoen and Brig. Roos. Cuban forces rapidly moved south from Humbe (occupied the same day) and Cuvelai to capture Pereira d'Eça – the last remaining provincial capital outside the MPLA's control – and with the occupation of the symbolic frontier post at Santa Clara a few days later, the 'Second Liberation War' was officially over.

**Immediate aftermath of the 'Second War of Liberation'**

News of the definitive withdrawal of the last South African forces on 27 March 1976 was greeted with elation by the MPLA government, which designated the date a national holiday, naming Luanda's annual *'Carnaval da Vitória'* ('Victory Carnival') in its honour. After fifteen years of armed struggle the MPLA was at last triumphant in Angola, and with the help of its Cuban allies it had not only vanquished its bitterest rivals – the FNLA and UNITA – but in the process had seen off the CIA and humbled the mighty Pretoria war machine. Overnight Neto became a hero of the Third World, and in the final weeks of the 'Second Liberation War' the PRA obtained formal diplomatic recognition not only from the OAU (which finally admitted it as a member on 10 February 1976), but also from the EEC (on 17 February) and Portugal (22

[185] Gleijeses ('Havana's policy in Africa', 1959-76', op. cit.) puts the figure higher at around 2,000.
[186] Valdés in Blasier & Mesa-Lago, op. cit., p.108. On 5 April 1976, MPLA & South African officials met at Calueque, and after several hours of negotiation agreed to re-open the hydroelectric scheme. Calueque was to continue to function throughout the Angolan War, despite South African aggression against Angola in the late 1970s and early 1980s. SADF troops occupied Calueque once more during Operation Protea in August 1981, and did not abandon it until after the Cuban MiG-23 air-strike (on 27 June 1988) which severely damaged the installations and killed twelve South Africans (see Chapter 11).

February).[187] The USA was the one notable exception, stubbornly refusing to recognise the government it had sought to keep out of power, but American moves to deny Angola a seat in the UN General Assembly could not be sustained, and on 22 November 1976 the PRA was finally admitted as the UN's 146th member.[188] It was quite a dramatic change in the MPLA's fortunes from the dark days following the Carnation Revolution which had been dominated by factional splits and military collapse, but with thousands of Cuban troops now bolstering its own growing military forces the MPLA government was confident that its power base was secure. This confidence was to prove dangerously misplaced, however, for the war in Angola had only temporarily submerged the MPLA's chronic disunity, and when it next manifested itself it was to have far more bloody and tragic consequences (see Nito Alves's coup in next chapter).

For Fidel Castro, the Cuban-led victory probably represented the peak in his political career, and gave him his first unequivocal internationalist victory. His daring – even reckless – decision to send thousands of troops into Angola could have backfired disastrously, but through a combination of cold determination and pure luck he had once again turned potential defeat into overwhelming victory, dramatically thrusting him back onto the international stage and affording Cuba a pivotal role in a region in which it had previously had little influence. It had been a nail-bitingly close contest – vital Cuban reinforcements arriving in some cases only hours before the crucial battles were fought – but the gamble had paid off, and the Cuban government was presented with a propaganda victory the completeness of which it could scarcely have imagined when it took the desperate decision to launch Operation Carlota back in November 1975. For not only had the Cuban intervention saved an internationally-recognised African government from annihilation, but in the process the regional pariah – South Africa – had been humbled in no uncertain terms, and (at least for the

[187] A simple majority was all that was needed for the PRA's admission to the OAU, but by March 1976 41 of the OAU's 46 members had unilaterally recognised the MPLA regime, rubber-stamping the MPLA's complete victory (Khazanov, op. cit., p.250).

[188] The PRA made a formal application to join the UN on 22 April 1976, but this was vetoed by the USA in the Security Council on 23 June. Diplomatic pressure on the USA eventually forced the American government to give in, however, and it abstained from the 13-0 vote in the Security Council which admitted the PRA as a member on 22 November. The American government did not formally recognise the PRA until 19 May 1993.

time-being) its presumed military invincibility convincingly quashed. The American government, still licking its wounds from its own debacle in Vietnam (Saigon had fallen to North Vietnamese forces on 30 April 1975, just as the war in Angola was entering its most critical phase), had been forced to watch its ill-chosen allies trounced on the battlefield, incapable of helping them after Congress passed the humiliating 'Clark Amendment' which would prevent them from playing any further military role in Angola for almost a decade.[189] And quite incredibly, all of this – not least the insertion of a massive military force into a region previously bereft of Cuban troops – had been achieved without the censure either of the OAU or the UN, a quite outstanding feat of diplomacy.[190]

This stunning military victory against the forces of imperialism was the ideal climax to Cuba's 'Institutionalisation' process,[191] and confirmed Castro's position as one of the Soviet Union's most important allies. Having spent the early 1970s in grave danger of being totally engulfed in the Soviet bear-hug, Castro had gone ahead with Operation Carlota against his Soviet patron's wishes, and his spectacular gamble had paid off. Following the Cuban victory in Angola he would now be allowed to exert a degree of independence in global affairs quite unlike any other Soviet-bloc leader, extending Soviet influence (under the Cuban guise) into countries and regions which had traditionally been outside their grasp (see 'Ethiopia intervention' in next chapter). Delighted at the acquisition of a new African ally at almost no risk to the Soviet Union, Brezhnev's government was more than happy to bankroll the Cuban operation,

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[189] The fallout from Operation IAFeature ended the careers of many of those involved – John Stockwell & Nathaniel Davis resigned their posts to write scathing criticisms of the CIA operation in Angola, and President Ford's authority was further weakened leading to his trouncing at the presidential election in November 1976, although in fairness to Ford few (if any) un-elected Vice-Presidents could have succeeded Nixon and been re-elected. Kissinger briefly survived as foreign affairs advisor to the US President, but eventually left office in 1977.

[190] On 22 January 1976 (before the PRA was formally admitted as a member) the OAU roundly condemned the South African invasion of Angola, but made no mention of the Cuban intervention, despite the fact that by this stage there were at least 10,000 Cuban troops in Angola. On 31 March 1976 the UN Security Council issued a similar condemnation of the South African invasion, again without censuring Cuba in any way. (The USA, along with four other countries, abstained from the vote.)

[191] The announcement that Cuban forces were advancing to victory in Angola was made by Fidel Castro on the last day of the PCC's First Party Congress (22 December 1975) when he was elected leader of the Communist Party, eventually assuming the presidency after a referendum the following February.

, the same day he was officially elected leader of the new Communist government.

and the generous Five Year Agreement it signed with Cuba on 14 April 1976 – which increased Soviet aid by over 250% whilst also favourably re-scheduling Cuba's massive foreign debt[192] – must in some way have been a payoff for this Cuban victory. From now on the Soviet Union – which only a few months before had been less than keen on escalating its commitment to the MPLA – would be the benevolent overseer of the Cuban operation, supplying or underwriting the vast majority of the military hardware. What neither Cuba nor the Soviet Union had any inkling of at the time, however, was just how long that military operation would end up lasting.

For South Africa, the failure of Operation Savannah left the Pretoria regime "without a single crumb of comfort".[193] For not only had it failed totally in its principal objective of installing the FNLA and UNITA in power, but by launching an invasion of Angola it had inadvertently triggered Cuba's massive military intervention, catapulting the MPLA to power and transforming the FAPLA into a formidable military force. South African attempts to keep the invasion secret had been hopelessly bungled, and once news that their troops were fighting in Angola leaked out in mid-November 1975, the international outcry had been so universal that it gave Cuba the justification it needed to send a military force into Africa which dwarfed all previous internationalist commitments. For a while Pretoria tried to place the entire blame on the American government – which it accused of losing its nerve and abandoning South Africa at the critical moment[194] – but there was little escaping the

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[192] Under the Agreement there would be a 250% increase in Soviet-Cuban economic and technical collaboration over the previous five-year period, the Soviet Union would install Cuba's first nuclear power plant and steel mill, and most importantly Soviet crude oil prices would be indexed to Cuban sugar prices, ensuring Cuba escaped the ravages of any fluctuation in the global sugar price. Cuba's debt was also re-scheduled with highly-favourable terms. As Edward González puts it: "By means of Angola, therefore, Fidel had simultaneously achieved two fundamental objectives in Cuba's relations with the USSR: He had cleared Havana's debts to the Soviet Union while recommitting the latter to still higher levels of economic, technological, and military support" (in Blasier & Mesa Lago, op. cit., p.25).

[193] Legum & Hodges, op. cit., p.36.

[194] On 1 February 1976, President Vorster appeared on television complaining that the USA had "misinterpreted the Angolan situation" and had been restrained from any further involvement by its "Vietnam psychosis". Vorster concluded ominously that Washington "should realise that a Marxist government in Luanda would have a domino effect in the rest of Southern Africa, notably in Zaire and Zambia" (quoted in Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.55). The Defence Minister PW Botha later said that if "America had shown her teeth the Russians might have capitulated, because they don't like to fight away from their fatherland" (quoted in Steenkamp, op. cit., p.60), and he went on to claim in an interview in The Telegraph (on 7 May 1976) that Zulu Force could easily have captured Luanda in early November but was pulled back because "the United States had pleaded" against such a move

fact that before Pretoria had decided to invade Angola there were less than 1,000 Cuban troops there, and that by the end of Operation Savannah that force had grown to over 36,000. Whatever monstrous chimera Pretoria might have imagined it was facing back in October 1975, it now had a very real hostile military force right up against its borders – and only itself to blame for it being there. The internal repercussions of the military withdrawal from Angola were felt quickly in South Africa when on 16 June 1976 – emboldened by the FAPLA-Cuban victory which had shattered the supposed invincibility of the SADF – the Soweto Uprisings began, inaugurating a period of civil unrest which was to continue unabated up until and beyond the collapse of apartheid. With SWAPO and ANC training camps starting to spring up all over southern Angola and the internal insurgency on the rise, the apartheid regime braced itself for a war on all fronts for its very survival.

Yet despite the Cuban's overwhelming military victory on the ground, the war in Angola was actually far from over, and to universal surprise it would drag on for another twelve years. For although the FNLA, UNITA and FLEC had suffered crushing defeats at the hands of the FAPLA-Cubans in Angola, they were to prove far more resilient than the either the MPLA or Cuban governments had anticipated. The FNLA would continue to threaten northern Angola from its bases in Zaire for the next three years, and UNITA – which in March 1976 had been completely written off as a threat by both the MPLA and Cubans – would confound everyone's expectations and succeed in re-building itself into a formidable military force which would eventually mount a direct challenge to the MPLA's power in Angola (see Chapter 8). More significantly, however, neither Cuba nor the MPLA appear to have appreciated that the failure of Operation Savannah was above all a political rather than a military one, and that the SADF (which fought impressively throughout the campaign) was far from defeated. It had been Pretoria's weak political leadership which had fatally compromised Zulu Force's chances of success in Angola, the constant changes in the

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(cited in Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-1976), op. cit., p.443, n261). PW Botha (in interview with author) claimed that the decision to withdraw from Angola was taken once the Americans reneged on their promise to mine Luanda harbour (which would have prevented the Cubans from heavily reinforcing Angola). When Kissinger visited South Africa several months later and was hosted at a banquet in Pretoria by PW Botha (then Prime Minister), Kissinger allegedly said to Botha "I owe you an apology".

operation's objectives and conflicting orders over the final withdrawal schedule (which was twice postponed) preventing the SADF commanders on the ground from exploiting any of the breakthroughs they managed to engineer (such as the attack across 'Bridge 14').

In the words of Operation Savannah's commander 'Corky' Van Heerden, it had been a "war of lost opportunities",[195] and many other officers in the SADF believed – rightly or wrongly – that Zulu Force had been robbed of victory. Certainly the South African force had got the better of its opponents in all but one of its engagements (the notable exception being the ambush at Ebo), and many SADF officers were convinced that had Zulu Force been given proper technical support – in the form of bridge-building equipment, for example – and adequate reinforcements, nothing could have prevented them from taking Luanda.[196] The failure of Operation Savannah thus left the South African military hungry for a second round against the FAPLA-Cubans, and bitterly determined to exact revenge for South Africa's most humiliating military defeat of the Cold War. For the time-being the SADF would need to retrench its positions in South Africa and brace itself for an onslaught against Namibia from the dozens of SWAPO and ANC bases springing up across southern Angola. But in the long-term, Pretoria could not allow SWAPO to operate with impunity so close to the Angola-Namibia border if it wished to maintain its control of Namibia, and thus it was only a matter of time before the SADF High Command began to push Pretoria to authorize cross-border raids, and eventually a second full-scale invasion of Angola (see next chapter). Renewed SADF interest in southern Angola would inevitably push South Africa back into its old alliance with UNITA, only this time the partnership would prove to be far more dynamic and lasting.

For the Cubans, therefore, victory in the 'Second War of Liberation' was to prove illusory, and would breed in them and the MPLA leadership a false sense of security. Believing his huge gamble had paid off spectacularly, in March 1976 Castro

[195] Quoted in Steenkamp, op. cit., p.60.
[196] In Steenkamp's analysis (op. cit., p.49), "the Cubans had proved to be unskilful at South African-style bush warfare, but adept at preparing defensive positions", and it was their ability to use this considerable talent in defensive operations which had decided the outcome of Operation Savannah.

immediately made moves to start withdrawing his troops from Angola as quickly as possible, anxious to avoid them becoming bogged down in a lengthy internal counter-insurgency. What Castro failed to grasp, however, was that given the complexity of the interlocking territorial and ideological disputes in the area – among them SWAPO's war against South Africa in Namibia, ZANU's war against Ian Smith's regime in Southern Rhodesia and the Katangese war against Mobutu's regime in Shaba (see next chapter) – a Cuban withdrawal was quite simply out of the question if the MPLA government was not to face immediate collapse. For the combined intervention by over a dozen countries in Angola had inextricably tangled up Angola's own war with half a dozen other disputes in the region, all of which would now need to be resolved simultaneously before any meaningful peace could come to Angola. To his growing dismay the Cuban leader would discover that far from being the short-term lightning intervention he had envisioned in November 1975, Operation Carlota had in fact committed Cuba indefinitely to supporting the MPLA, unintentionally initiating Cuba's fifteen-year military occupation of Angola.

# Chapter 6

# The failed withdrawal from Angola

# 1976-1981

The period running from the final withdrawal of South African forces from Angola (27 March 1976) up until the launch of Operation Protea (23 August 1981) was one of increasing instability in Angola and great frustration for the Cuban government whose efforts to curtail the Cuban military operation were constantly thwarted. As Angola's security steadily deteriorated – with two invasions of Zaire's Shaba province from eastern Angola by Katangese gendarmes (March 1977 & May 1978), an attempted coup against Neto's regime (27 May 1977), the growth of UNITA in southern and central Angola and South Africa's eventual occupation of Cunene – Cuba's short-term intervention force slowly evolved into a long-term army of occupation, committing Cuban forces to Angola for an indefinite period. Gradually the delirious optimism which had accompanied the FAPLA-Cuban victory in the 'Second Liberation War' would give way to a bleak realisation that the war was far from over, and eventually both Cuba and the MPLA would be forced to recognise that in Savimbi's UNITA they had a far more persistent and intractable enemy than Roberto's FNLA. Having won the ground war with great speed and drama, the Cubans would spend the next five years fruitlessly attempting to win the peace, but their attempts to hand over the defence of Angola to the newly-trained FAPLA army would prove unsuccessful, and by the end of this period they would find themselves locked in a full-scale counter-insurgency against UNITA which threatened to escalate out of control at any moment.

## Cuban attempts to withdraw from Angola, 1976-77

Even before Zulu Force had completed its final withdrawal from southern Angola, the Cuban leadership had begun discussing ways of reducing the 36,000-man Cuban military force in Angola, with the aim of withdrawing it altogether within a few years. From the outset Fidel Castro had envisaged Operation Carlota as a short-term operation with the simple objective of securing the MPLA in power, and once this had

been achieved he was keen to start withdrawing his troops before they became committed indefinitely to the Angolan War. Cuban casualties had up to that point been light – around 130 Cubans had been killed in the fighting, if official figures are to be believed[1] – and Castro was only too aware how easily the dramatic victory in Angola could quickly degenerate into a Vietnam scenario if early efforts were not made to curtail the operation forthwith. Furthermore, regional support for the Cuban operation which had been overwhelming up to that point was in danger of ebbing away if the Cuban military presence in Angola were allowed to extend itself indefinitely, for once Operation Carlota's dual objectives of shoring up the MPLA and ejecting foreign military forces from Angola had been achieved, the Cubans would quickly open themselves up to accusations of being a foreign occupying army. By March 1976 Cuban troop levels in Angola had risen to around 36,000 men (supported by over 300 tanks),[2] and if only to ensure that Cuba's own island defences were not prejudiced the vast bulk of these would have to be withdrawn quickly before they became bogged down in the inevitable 'mopping-up' operations which would follow.

Accordingly on 14 March 1976 – nearly a fortnight before South African forces completed their withdrawal from southern Angola – Fidel Castro met with Neto in Conakry and outlined a plan to start withdrawing Cuban troops at a rate of 200 per

[1] Less than one month after the South Africans completed their withdrawal from Angola, Fidel Castro revealed in his annual Bay of Pigs speech that Cuban "losses [in Angola] were minimal. In spite of the fact that the war was fought on four fronts... fewer Cuban soldiers were killed in action in over four months of fighting in Angola than in the three days of fighting at Girón", i.e. less than 161, the official Cuban fatality figure for the Bay of Pigs invasion (speech reprinted in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.70-75). In an interview with Gianni Miná on 28 June 1987 Castro gave a more precise figure, alleging that 'around 130' Cubans had been killed during the 'Second Liberation War' (Gianni Miná, Un Encuentro con Fidel, Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo del Estado, Havana, 1987, p.208). This figure is broadly in line with official figures (cited by Risquet in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.345) which put the total number of Cuban casualties as of 15 February 1976 at 77 killed, 176 wounded & 38 MIA. Pamela S Falk ('Cuba in Africa', Foreign Affairs, Vol. 65, No. 5, USA, Summer 1987op. cit., p.1083) puts the total killed slightly higher at 400, Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.134) at over 500, and the SADF as high as 2,000 (cited in Marcum, The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.444, n281). The true number of Cuban casualties during Operation Carlota will probably never be known as Havana has released casualty figures only piecemeal, and usually ambiguously (see Chapter 12), but given that the Cuban troops were mainly involved in defensive battles – such as Catengue, Quifangondo and N'to – and only suffered one major military setback (the 'Battle of Bridge 14'), a figure of 300 killed for the whole 1975/76 campaign may be closer to the mark.

[2] See below for discussion of the actual size of the Cuban military contingent in Angola.

week.[3] Neto readily accepted Castro's proposals, and on 22 April both governments officially announced that the withdrawal of Cuban troops had begun, Raúl Castro flying into Luanda four days later to begin hammering out the details. Raúl Castro was keen for 15,000 to be withdrawn by October 1976, and he instructed the Chiefs of MMCA's Rearguard to draw up a detailed withdrawal programme which they presented to Fidel Castro in Havana on 7 May.[4] Castro was not happy with the plan, however, and despite being anxious to withdraw his troops rapidly he was nevertheless keen to conceal from foreign observers the true size of the Cuban forces stationed in Angola. Castro therefore suggested that instead of sending the bulk of the troops back in one large convoy, they should be spread evenly among various different ships and aircraft over a period of many months. Some troops would merely be transferred to other Cuban military missions in the region (such as Congo-Brazzaville) where they would form an emergency reserve force for the Angolan mission.[5] In the end Raúl Castro's estimates were shown to have been wildly optimistic, however, for by August only 2,000 Cuban troops had returned to Cuba, and for the next year the withdrawal would continue at a no more than a trickle as the Cuban intervention force in Angola gradually turned into a permanent occupying garrison. By the time Fidel Castro visited Luanda in March 1977 he would have become concerned enough by the slow pace of the withdrawal to suggest ambitious new plans to Neto, but these were to be dramatically overtaken by events that year, instigating the first of many postponements (see below).

## Cuban 'mopping-up' operations against FLEC, 1976-1977

As soon as the Cuban-FAPLA offensives on the Northern and Southern Fronts were officially completed (April 1976), the Cuban military set about crushing the remaining pockets of UNITA, FLEC and FNLA resistance in Angola. Himself the

[3] Both Castro and Neto were in Conakry for a rally to celebrate the FAPLA-Cuban victory in Angola. Sékou Touré and Luís Cabral (president of Guinea-Bissau) were present at the rally and also gave speeches (Henriksen, op. cit., p.66).
[4] The Chief of MMCA's Rearguard was Brig.-Gen. Carlos Rodés Moros, while Brig.-Gen. Orlando Almaguel Vidal was his second-in-command (Báez, op. cit., p.209).
[5] For this reason Raúl Castro visited Congo-Brazzaville in early June to arrange for the arrival there of 3,000 Cuban troops from Angola (Valdés, op. cit., p.659). Three days after his brother's visit to

survivor of a disastrous military set-back two decades before,[6] Fidel Castro was only too aware how illusory a victory Angola could prove to be if the shattered remnants of the FNLA, FLEC and UNITA were given time to regroup and rebuild themselves, and he therefore ordered 'mopping-up' operations to be launched as soon as was practicable. The FNLA, despite its complete military collapse in northern Angola, would be particularly difficult to stamp out as it continued to operate freely from bases along the Zairian border, and in an effort to isolate Roberto on 28/29 February 1976 Neto met with Mobutu in Brazzaville and signed what was in effect a non-aggression pact.[7] In return for Neto's pledge to disarm and repatriate the 6,000 Katangese gendarmes who had fought alongside the FAPLA during the 'Second Liberation War', Mobutu promised to expel all remaining FNLA and UNITA personnel from Zaire, and curtail FLEC operations in Kinshasa. Both countries would refrain from any military action against each other, and diplomatic relations would be normalised. Two years later both sides would find it convenient to stick to the very same deal, but in February 1976 the regional situation was simply too volatile (and the distrust between both parties too great) for it to work, and it would take two invasions of Zaire's Shaba province in 1977 and 1978 (and the international repercussions they caused) to bring both parties back to the negotiating table.

In Cabinda FLEC still posed a serious threat, and heavy fighting between its guerrillas and the FAPLA-Cubans continued throughout 1976 and 1977, the Cubans suffering debilitating casualties as they attempted to dominate the exceedingly difficult terrain.[8] The small FAPLA-Cuban force under Div.-Gen. Espinosa Martín had successfully defeated the FLEC-Zairian invasion in November 1975, but had not been strong enough to extend its control over the rest of the enclave until reinforcements were sent from Cuba. These duly arrived on 3 December when the Sierra Maestra docked at

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Brazzaville, Fidel Castro publicly announced that Cuban troops had started withdrawing from Angola, and this was repeated by Neto when he visited Havana in July of that year.

[6] See Chapter 1 for description of Alegría de Pío ambush and the subsequent re-birth of the FAR.

[7] Viney (op. cit., p.57) dates the meeting on 28 February, whereas W Martin James III (A Political History of the Civil War in Angola: 1974-1990, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992, p.77) dates the meeting a day later.

[8] My account of the fighting in Cabinda from December 1975 to mid-1976 is taken from Galo Antonio Carvajal García, Recuerdos de una campaña: Premio Testimonio 1981, Editorial 13 de marzo, Havana, 1982 & interviews with Div.-Gen. Joaquin Quintas Solá, Brig.-Gen. Orlando Almaguel Vidal & Div.-Gen. Ramón Espinosa Martín in Báez, op. cit., pp.199-201, 210-211 & 459-463.

Pointe-Noire, unloading over 1,000 troops supported by tanks and artillery,[9] and by February 1976 there were over 5,000 Cuban troops stationed in Angola.[10] FLEC activity (which had petered out following the failed invasion) stepped up again in late December with a series of ambushes, one of which – on 27 December – succeeded in destroying two supply trucks en route from Lândana to Massabi.[11] By February 1976 the Cuban commanders were ready to strike back, launching Operation Pañuelo Blanco ('White Handkerchief') with the objective of surrounding and destroying the last remaining concentration of 700 FLEC guerrillas operating in the Necuto area (60 miles northeast of Cabinda city). The operation was a failure, however, and the FLEC force managed to break out of the encirclement, laying minefields which caused the Cubans several casualties as they attempted to pursue the retreating guerrillas. Further skirmishing continued for the next month, but when in late March FLEC attacks left five Cubans dead – among them the Chief Political Commissar of the Cuban forces in Cabinda, Cirio Berro – a decision was taken to liquidate the column once and for all.

In early April the entire Cuban regiment was deployed in a horseshoe encirclement with the objective of driving the FLEC column westwards towards the sea, cutting off its supply lines and them moving in for the kill. Heavy fighting ensued over the following days, and the FAPLA-Cubans succeeded in putting a tight cordon around the FLEC force, killing eleven guerrillas as they attempted to break out on the night of 5/6 April. A further 80 were killed the following night in a similar attempt, and over 100 in the final clash in which 300 FLEC guerrillas were taken prisoner.[12] The annihilation of the column was a serious set-back for FLEC, but it did not herald the movement's collapse – as Div.-Gen. Espinosa Martín (who was re-appointed Chief of the Cuban mission in Cabinda in March) was to discover to his personal cost a month

[9] According to Carvajal (op. cit., p.13), the Cubans had great difficulty unloading the heavy equipment (especially the tanks) as the ship's cranes had only been designed to carry loads of up to 15 tonnes. The ship had been very heavily loaded as the Cuban commanders wanted to ensure the entire unit was sent all at once, making conditions during the fourteen-day crossing rather cramped.

[10] Jorge Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.345) maintains that by 15 February 1976 a total of 5,245 Cubans had been sent to Cabinda.

[11] Following the ambush, a Cuban patrol was sent to comb the area, clashing with a FLEC unit the following morning. In the fighting one Cuban was killed and 12 FLEC prisoners were taken (Carvajal, op. cit., p.16).

later. On 8 May, as he was leading a small Cuban column operating along the eastern frontier with Zaire between Tando Zinze and Chiobo, the armoured car he was travelling in (a BTR-60) hit an anti-tank mine, overturning the vehicle in a massive explosion.[13] One Cuban officer was killed, and four were seriously wounded, among them Espinosa who was trapped in agony underneath the BTR while his soldiers attempted to lift it off him.[14] The Chief Political Commissar (Gen. Francisco González López) immediately took over command of the column and guided it to Chiobo, before Furry ordered its return to Cabinda city. Espinosa required a lengthy hospitalisation and was eventually flown back to Cuba for specialist treatment, effectively ending his active military career.[15]

News of the incident was greeted with alarm in Havana, and Fidel Castro – who was hosting a dinner with various Cuban officers that evening, among them Cabinda's previous commander Div.-Gen. Joaquin Quintas Solá – was quick to criticise Espinosa for what he described as a grave tactical error. Quintas sprang to Espinosa's defence, however, insisting that his decision to put all his men in two armoured cars was only logical in a terrain such as Cabinda where large columns were especially vulnerable to detection and ambush.[16] After lengthy conversations Castro ordered Quintas to return to Cabinda and take over command of the Cuban operation there, which he did on 18 May. Heavy fighting ensued over the next six months, the Cubans employing all the tactics at their disposal to crush the FLEC insurgency – including

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[12] Casualty figures are taken from Carvajal (op. cit., p.18), who claims that many more FLEC dead were left uncounted in the jungle.

[13] For a full account of the circumstances leading to the incident, see interview with Div.-Gen. Ramón Espinosa Martín in Báez, op. cit., pp.459-463. Espinosa described the explosion as being like "an atomic bomb. I felt like I was being hurled with the BTR though a white cloud of dust" (author's translation). Ironically, Espinosa had on three occasions turned down suggestions by his subordinates that he travel in the BTR, preferring to use a Soviet jeep. Within minutes of transferring to the BTR, however, it had hit an anti-tank mine packed with 15kg of TNT. Espinosa's column had already set off several mines by this point, losing a ZIL-157 APC and suffering various casualties.

[14] The one fatality was Comandante Aristides Estévez who died of wounds on arriving in Luanda. Ironically he had been one of those who had insisted Espinosa ride inside the BTR for his own safety. The three other men seriously wounded were Guido Santana (artillery), Romelio Martínez (MININT) & Reynaldo Rufín (communicator). Many men received cuts and bruises from the explosion.

[15] Espinosa suffered eight broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and a fractured pelvis, fibula and heel bone. He would never serve on an internationalist mission again, but was part of the official Cuban delegation during Fidel Castro's visit to Africa in March 1977. He is now the Commander of the Eastern Army in Cuba, a very senior position in the FAR.

[16] Brig.-Gen. Orlando Almaguel Vidal corroborates Quintas' claim that he defended Espinosa (in Báez, op. cit., p.211).

helicopter landings behind enemy lines, and even naval landings to cut off the guerrillas' lines of retreat. The jungle terrain made conditions extremely difficult and the Cuban forces suffered significant losses in FLEC ambushes,[17] but by the end of 1976 they had broken FLEC's grip on Cabinda, and for the next decade FLEC activity in the enclave would never amount to more than nuisance value. His mission accomplished, Quintas was sent back to Cuba in late 1976, unaware that he would return once more to Cabinda a year later in the wake of the first Shaba invasion (see below). The Luanda regime's most precious assets – the rich oil fields off Cabinda – were now secure, and a Cuban garrison was installed at Malembo to protect it against any attempts to sabotage oil production. It would be almost a decade before a raid by South African commandos would threaten the enclave's security once more (see Chapter 8).

**Attempts to crush UNITA – the 'Luta Contra Bandidos' (LCB)**

Attempts to definitively crush UNITA were not to be as successful, however, in part because the FAPLA-Cuban commanders appear to have underestimated Savimbi's tenacity and determination to continue the war. By far the weakest military force during the 'Second Liberation War', UNITA was (perhaps understandably) viewed by the Cuban commanders as a minor threat and – following the capture of its last base at Gago Coutinho (Lumbala N'Guimbo) on 17 March 1976 – they expected to mop up remaining pockets of UNITA resistance without great difficulty. Cuban specialists in counter-insurgency were called in to plan a series of operations which were termed the 'Luta Contra Bandidos' (LCB, literally 'Fight against Bandits'). The phrase was taken directly from the Cuban army which had fought and won its own 'Lucha Contra Bandidos' against anti-Castro guerrillas (many of them Castro's former comrades) in the Sierra Escambray between 1959 and 1966, and given their extensive experience in fighting counter-insurgency campaigns, Cuban troops were chosen to spearhead the first LCB operations.[18] Between April and November 1976 four successive

[17] Unusually for a Cuban officer recounting an internationalist mission, Quintas has freely admitted that "the [FLEC] ambushes caused us heavy losses" (author's translation from Báez, op. cit., p.201).
[18] One of the FAR's most decorated internationalists – Div.-Gen. Raúl Menéndez Tomassevich – spent his second Angolan tour commanding the LCB against UNITA. During 'Operation Olivo' he narrowly escaped death when a FAPLA helicopter crashed on top of the Volga jeep he was travelling in. The

operations were launched to clear UNITA out of Moxico, southern Cuando Cubango and Cunene,[19] but as the fighting dragged on and UNITA held out tenaciously, a feeling of resentment started to grow among the Cuban commanders at the way their troops were being forced to bear the brunt of the hardest fighting whilst the FAPLA were mostly assigned to garrison duties.[20] Criticism of how the FAPLA were running the LCB grew in the Cuban High Command, and by March 1977 would be serious enough for Fidel Castro to raise the matter in his conversations with Neto (see below).

**Location and size of Cuban forces in Angola (1976 onwards)**

The vast majority of Cuban forces were not involved in the LCB, however, and following the South African withdrawal were assigned mainly to garrison duties in Angola's main cities. Adopting a pattern which was to continue for most of Cuba's fifteen-year occupation of Angola, the bulk of the Cuban forces were located in or around Luanda, protecting not only Angola's political and economic capital but also Cuba's principal supply port for the military operation. The LCB training camp – comprising a force of between 3,000 and 4,000 Cuban troops – was located in the Funda suburb, with naval units in the port itself and a large aerial contingent which included MiG-21s & MiG-23s, helicopters (Mi-8 & Mi-24) and Su-22s (fighter-bombers). As the operation extended into the 1980s, however, each of Angola's seventeen provincial capitals was garrisoned with at least one Cuban regiment, one of the largest in Huambo having its own MiG-21/23 regiment and a brigade of tanks (c.100 in total) stationed to the south in Caála. The largest single concentration of

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helicopter crew and three FAPLA soldiers sitting in the back seat of the jeep were killed, and the driver and a Soviet colonel were wounded, but Tomassevich miraculously survived unscathed. "It appears that like cats I have nine lives" he later said. He went on to write the official FAR account of the LCB in Angola entitled La lucha armada de las FAPLA contra la UNITA en la RPA ('The FAPLA's armed struggle against UNITA in the PRA') (Báez, op. cit., p.107).

[19] In April 1976 the FAPLA-Cubans launched Operation Ferro ('Iron') with the aim of sweeping UNITA rebels out of the Lungué-Bungo valley (north of Gago Coutinho), and in May extended operations into northern Moxico with Operation Tigre ('Tiger'). In August Operation Kwenha extended FAPLA control over southern Cuando Cubango, capturing Mucusso on 29 August. And finally in November the FAPLA-Cubans launched Operation Vakulukutu, the largest post-war offensive against UNITA aimed at clearing them out of Cunene (Bridgland, op. cit., p.236 & James, op. cit., p.192).

[20] The Cuban LCB training unit based in Funda (Luanda) was widely-known to be the toughest and most miserable posting in the Cuban army, and by the early 1980s Cuban internationalists were making

Cuban troops outside Luanda – initially around 10,000 men with tanks, aircraft and air defences in support – was located along the 400-mile long ATS Defence Line ('Agrupación de Tropas del Sur', 'Southern Troop Grouping') running from Namibe on the coast along the railway line to Menongue.[21] As UNITA and South Africa's war in southern Angola intensified in the early 1980s, Lubango (which was the headquarters of the ATS Defence Line) would grow into the single largest Cuban garrison in Angola – Batallón 2 – totalling nearly 5,000 men with tanks, artillery and sophisticated radar and air defences.[22] Some Cuban bases were also located south of this line – for example at Tchibemba, Tchamutete or Jamba – but the official policy was for Cuban troops not to operate in Cunene or southern Cuando Cubango.[23]

The precise number of Cuban troops in Angola is still hotly disputed and has been scrupulously covered up by the FAR which – perhaps understandably given the sensitivity of this information – did not wish its enemies to know the true size of its military forces there. However, it is clear that initial American estimates that by late 1977 there were between 12,000 and 15,000 Cuban troops in Angola were woefully inaccurate, the actual figure having grown to around three times that number by the time Castro visited Angola in March of that year.[24] Cuban forces would continue to grow in Angola as the security situation deteriorated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and by 1983 there would be no less than 26 Cuban regiments in Angola – each numbering between 2,000 and 3,000 men, bringing the grand total to as many as

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concerted efforts to ensure they didn't get posted to it (author's interviews with Cuban veterans, Havana, 1997-2000).

[21] Lubango, Jamba, Cuchi and Menongue had the largest Cuban regiments in the ATS. In Menongue, for example, there was one Cuban regiment at the airport, one Tactical Group & one sapper company at the dam, one Tactical Group at the Marcolino training camp (on the outskirts of Menongue), one Tactical Group on the road to Missombo, and one tank/BMD company at the river (author's interview with FAPLA veterans, Menongue, March 1998). Cuban garrisons – and sometimes only small outposts – were dotted along the railway line at Humpata, Quipungo and Cuchi, and following the South African invasion in August 1981 some Cuban units also began to operate south of this railway line.

[22] In an interview in January 1985 (reprinted in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.94-95) Castro admitted that the ATS had grown to 20,000 men, with a further 10,000 in northern Angola. It is doubtful, however, that total Cuban forces in Angola were as few as 30,000 by this date.

[23] In Tchibemba there was a Cuban tank company supported by sappers, an anti-tank group and radars, and by the early 1980s a BM-21 regiment which allegedly inflicted severe damage on the SADF during Operation Askari (see Chapter 8).

[24] When Fidel Castro met with Eric Honecker on 3 April 1977 he told him that there were 36,000 troops in Angola (CWIHP, op. cit.), a figure which is broadly in line with Jorge Risquet's estimate of 30,000 (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., p.345). At that stage the American government believed there

80,000 Cuban troops.[25] This figure would start to decrease in the late 1980s as the Soviets started to take over the running of the FAPLA's military operations (see Chapter 9), but the constant increase in the Cuban military contingent in Angola nevertheless demonstrated powerfully how a foreign military power – whether Portugal (in the 1960s and early 1970s) or Cuba and South Africa (from the 1970s onwards) – could gradually get sucked deeper and deeper into Angola's internal conflict, even when it was actively seeking to withdraw it forces. Throughout its fifteen-year occupation of Angola, however, the Cuban government never admitted that it had more than 40,000 troops in Angola (prior to 1987), and discussion over the exact size of the Cuban contingent would become one of the major sticking points of the 'linkage' negotiating process, further fuelling mistrust between the warring parties and putting yet more strain on the delicate calculations being made by the Americans (see Chapter 11).

The decision to assign the vast majority of the Cuban troops to garrison duties while the inexperienced FAPLA struggled to stamp out what was left of the FNLA and UNITA was adopted for two principal reasons. Firstly, the Cuban government was anxious to keep Cuban casualties (which up to that point had been remarkably light) to an absolute minimum, only too conscious that public opinion could swing against the Angolan adventure if casualties started to mount. But secondly, by keeping the majority of its troops out of the firing line, the Cuban government could reinforce the impression that it had not sent in Cuban troops to crush internal dissent but to protect the MPLA government from external enemies, an essential aim if regional support for the Cuban operation were to be maintained.[26] Castro had initially envisioned a short-term military intervention, and following the ejection of Zairian and South African

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were only 12,000 Cuban troops in Angola (Valdés, op. cit., p.665), a misperception Castro was clearly keen to promote.

[25] I obtained this figure from an ex-FAR officer who served in southern Angola between 1983 and 1985 and who gave me a detailed break-down of all the principal regiments in Angola at the time. Allowing for the usual over-lap of Cubans arriving with those who were about to leave, it is fair to assume that at some points in the late 1980s there were over 100,000 Cubans in Angola, representing around 1% of the Cuban population (author's interview with ex-FAR officer, Havana, September 1999).

[26] In an interview with Gianni Miná on 28/29 June 1987, Castro emphasized the point, declaring: "There has been an internal war, but the internal war is fundamentally an activity of the Angolans. Our task is to defend the south of the country so that another large-scale foreign invasion doesn't occur" (author's translation from Miná, op. cit., p.208).

forces from Angola he hoped to scale down the Cuban military contingent to a modest garrison – perhaps 5,000 men in total, with a large permanent military instruction force for the FAPLA and various liberation movements based in Angola (see below) – while greatly expanding the civilian internationalist contingent which by 1977 had already climbed to nearly 5,000 (see next chapter). Eventually – it was hoped – Cuban troops would be able to hand over their duties to the newly-trained FAPLA, enabling them to withdraw altogether from Angola leaving a strong and professional FAPLA in their place which would be able to see off any future threat, both internal (FLEC, FNLA or UNITA) and external (South Africa or Zaire).

## Cuban military training programmes in Angola, 1976-77

The training and equipping of this new FAPLA therefore became the other main task facing the Cuban mission, a formidable one given that by 1977 the FAPLA had grown to over 70,000 men. By March 1976 – exactly a year since the Soviet Union had first escalated its military aid programme in Angola – the FAPLA had received over $300 million worth of Soviet weaponry and equipment, over five times the amount of Soviet military aid it had received during the previous fifteen years.[27] The new equipment included more than one hundred T-34/54 tanks, 21 BM-21 missile-launchers, hundreds of armoured cars and personnel carriers, dozens of armed helicopters, thousands of machine-guns and pistols, and the FAPLA's first aircraft – a squadron of MiG-21 jet fighters which formed the nucleus of the fledgling Angolan Air Force (formed on 22 January 1976).[28] Over the next five years Cuban instructors

[27] Figure taken from Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.27. Soviet aid to the MPLA from 1960 to March 1975 had totalled only $54 million.

[28] According to Legum & Hodges (op. cit., p.58), the FAPLA received several BM-21s, 68 PT-76 light amphibious tanks, ten T-54 tanks, twenty T-34 tanks, twelve MiG-21 jets and three FIAT-91 jets. Valdés (in Blasier & Mesa Lago, op. cit., p.105) quotes a CIA source which claimed the combined FAPLA-Cuban force was 120 T-54 and T-34 tanks, 70 Soviet BRDM armoured personnel carriers, numerous multi-barrelled rocket launchers, twelve MiG-21s & ten MiG-17s. In a letter to Fidel Castro dated 29 January 1976 Jorge Risquet noted the arrival (by Soviet ship) in Luanda of 73 tanks, 21 BM-21s and 10 MiG-17s, all of them for the FAPLA (see Appendix 1 for full text of letter). Ronnie Kasrils (MK commander in Angola) got a glimpse of the scale of the Soviet supply operation in 1977 when driving from Luanda to Quibaxe. Passing a massive vehicle park on the city's outskirts he saw "row upon row of Soviet military vehicles of every description. [The driver] told me the place was never empty. Every week it was cleared, and the vehicles replaced by more arriving by ship" (Ronnie Kasrils, Armed and Dangerous: From undercover struggle to freedom, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1998, p.139).

(and Soviet advisors) would set about creating a FAPLA army of twenty-three brigades – nineteen of infantry (two of them motorised) and four of anti-aircraft artillery – a massive military force which it was hoped would deter any future invasion of Angola by Zaire or South Africa and would eventually be able to crush UNITA once and for all.[29] The bulk of the training was carried out by Cuban instructors at several CIR's dotted across Angola (including the four set up by MMCA the previous September), although the small contingent of Soviet advisors (perhaps a couple of hundred officers) maintained a significant presence in the FAPLA High Command – mostly overseeing the planning of operations and weapons handovers.

As the mission to train the FAPLA progressed, it slowly evolved into what would become the blue-print for all future Soviet-Cuban operations in Africa, the Cubans providing the instructors while the Soviets provided the majority of the military hardware, and in many ways resembled the embryonic partnership which had developed during the Brazzaville operation (1965-67). This alliance of interests was to prove particularly successful as it drew on each partner's comparative strength. The Soviet Union's strength was its colossal military industrial complex (MIC) which provided the raw material for building the FAPLA into a sub-Saharan superpower. Cuba's strength was in its manpower, and in particular its plentiful supply of specialist officers who were familiar with the highly-sophisticated weaponry supplied by the Soviets to the FAPLA, and who often had first-hand experience of using it in battle.[30] Having only just completed its own re-organisation and re-equipment programme, the FAR could draw on a large number of experienced officers for the Angolan mission, and demand for postings to Angola was initially very high in the FAR's professional ranks. The MPLA preferred to use Cuban instructors because

[29] Size of forces taken from Horace Campbell, The Siege of Cuito Cuanavale, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala (Sweden), October 1990, p.17, who also notes that the militia forces (numbering over 50,000 men) were also organised into 'People's Vigilance Brigades' which after 1983 were brought under the direct control of the FAPLA. In April 1977 Fidel Castro told Honecker that the FAPLA army numbered 70,000 (CWIHP, op. cit.), around twice the size of the forces Campbell describes. Possibly Campbell was only referring to complete units which were ready for operations and did not include the many local garrisons.

[30] Many of the officers who served in Operation Carlota – including Argüelles, Schueg Colás and Furry – had fought either in the Revolutionary War, at the Bay of Pigs or on recent internationalist missions in Guiné, Colombia and Syria.

their training programmes went far beyond the basics and included ideological and political instruction, a bonus for even the more experienced FAPLA cadres who in general lacked sound political training. The Cubans emphasized discipline, political indoctrination and loyalty to the regime as much as they did the technical aspects of weaponry use and tactics, and this was to prove an extremely useful combination in a region where army mutinies were a regular occurrence.[31]

The Cuban training programme also involved a massive covert operation to set up and run dozens of training camps for the MPLA's regional allies – SWAPO, the ANC and ZAPU – all of which were still engaged in their own independence struggles with southern Africa's last colonial powers, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. By June 1976 all three movements had opened offices in Luanda's newly-named Rua da Libertação, and over the following year Cuban and Soviet specialists helped them set up training camps across most of Angola, the Soviets providing the bulk of the weaponry while the Cubans provided many of the instructors. The main camp of the ANC's military wing – 'Umkhonto weSizwe' ('Spear of the Nation') or 'MK' – was located in the old Portuguese barracks at Novo Catengue (near the site of the bloody clash with Zulu Force in November 1975). This was run by a large contingent of Cuban instructors and weapons specialists who oversaw six-month training programmes for groups of up to 500 MK recruits.[32] Between late 1976 and the camp's destruction by the SAAF in March 1979 over 1,000 MK cadres were trained at Novo Catengue and – in recognition of the Cuban contribution to the ANC's cause – the third MK contingent to graduate in November 1977 was named the 'Moncada Detachment' in their honour.[33] MK also operated many other smaller camps in

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[31] Jorge I Domínguez, 'Cuban Foreign Policy', op. cit., p.95. Ultimately the political divisions inside the MPLA were beyond Cuban control, however, and one of the units trained by the Cubans – the FAPLA 8th Infantry Brigade – would in May 1977 mutiny in support of Nito Alves' coup attempt (see below).

[32] Information on Novo Catengue is taken from Ronnie Kasrils (op. cit, pp.171-188). The Chief Cuban officer at the camp was Colonel Rodríguez and he liaised with MK commander Banda in the running of the training programme. The MK camp commander was called Julius, with Thami Zulu as his Chief of Staff. Kasrils noted that the Cubans were "full of fire and passion" and saw their mission in Angola as a fraternal duty.

[33] The standard of cadres produced at Novo Catengue was considered so high that Ronnie Kasrils (later ANC Minister of Defence) dubbed the CIR 'the University of the South'. Possibly because of Novo Catengue's importance to MK, in September 1977 South African agents infiltrated the camp and poisoned the food of around 500 MK guerrillas, although it is unclear if they succeeded in killing them

Angola using its own instructors – including 'Camp Thirteen' at Quibaxe (100 miles east of Caxito) where fresh MK recruits underwent an induction course before being sent on to Novo Catengue – but the Cubans nevertheless maintained contacts with these camps and occasionally helped them out with supplies.[34]

Cuban and Soviet instructors also helped run a number of SWAPO training camps in Angola, although Cuban garrisons in Cunene and Malanje were housed quite separately from the FAPLA and SWAPO throughout the war. SWAPO had been operating in southern Angola since the mid-1960s, and had switched sides to the MPLA in August 1975 after news of Savimbi's alliance with the SADF had leaked out. Following the South African withdrawal SWAPO started to receive massive amounts of Soviet military aid, and by February 1977 SWAPO was strong enough to begin infiltrating northern Namibia and Caprivi from bases in Cunene and Zambia, prompting an aggressive response from the SADF (see below).[35] Cuban instructors were also involved in training ZAPU troops at a camp in Cuculama (40 miles east of Malanje), and by early 1977 there were nearly 6,000 ZAPU troops training across Angola, representing a genuine threat to Ian Smith's regime in Southern Rhodesia.[36] Cuban instructors may also have been involved in training the Katangese gendarmes who had fought alongside the MPLA during the 'Second Liberation War', although the evidence is still sketchy and the issue highly-controversial (see 'Shaba I invasion' below). And finally throughout this period thousands of Cuban civilians were also involved in setting up and running the massive technical and humanitarian operation in Angola, the details of which are discussed in full in the next chapter.

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(from ANC submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), August 1996, available at http://www.truth.org.za/submit/anctruth.htm).

[34] Kasrils (op. cit., p.146) notes that after there had been gunfire at the MK camp in the night several Cubans came round the following morning to check if everything was all right, offering to lend Kasril's men some AK-47s until more supplies arrived from Luanda. Near Quibaxe was also located the infamous 'Quatro' camp where ANC infiltrators were taken for interrogation and (allegedly) torture.

[35] Geldenhuys (op. cit., p.60) notes that in late February 1977 SWAPO launched its first raid into Caprivi since July 1975, wounding three SADF soldiers before withdrawing. However, twelve SWAPO guerrillas were allegedly killed in the withdrawal.

[36] Cuba had opted to support Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU as it was already in receipt of significant Soviet aid, whereas Robert Mugabe's ZANU was receiving aid from China. In the end, however, Cuban military advisors ended up aiding ZANU as well, a small contingent travelling to Mozambique in February 1976 to begin a modest training programme (Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.136).

Thus, by early 1977 Cuba had transformed Angola into what Che Guevara had originally envisioned for eastern Zaire back in 1965: a vast training ground for Africa's principal liberation movements (SWAPO, the ANC and ZAPU), with almost limitless possibilities for infiltrating enemy territory and concealing the presence of training camps within Angola itself. The subsequent increase in MK activity within South Africa and SWAPO infiltration of Namibia – which was a direct result of the Cuban training programme in Angola – did not go unnoticed by Pretoria, however, and it would only be a matter of time before the SADF sought authorisation to launch cross-border raids against SWAPO and MK camps in Angola, re-initiating South Africa's intervention in southern Angola (see 'Cassinga raid' below).

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**Fidel Castro's African tour, March 1977**

In March 1977 Fidel Castro set out on a triumphal tour of Africa during which he intended not only to celebrate his military victory in Angola with Cuba's more trusted African allies, but also to confirm his new-found role as chief spokesman for the Third World.[37] Castro was particularly keen to play the role of international mediator in African affairs, and during his tour he visited Libya, South Yemen and Somalia to

[37] Following the resounding success of Operation Carlota, in August 1976 Cuba was elected to chair the next NAM Conference in Havana, a move which finally gave Castro the opportunity to challenge Yugoslavia's Marshal Tito as the Third World's unofficial spokesman. The election of Castro as President of the NAM at that Conference in September 1979 signalled his victory over Tito, and according to rumour contributed to the Yugoslav leader's death the following May.

discuss proposals for a Socialist Federation between the latter two and Ethiopia. The idea was doomed from the start, however, and Castro was instead drawn into the more pressing territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia over the former's eastern border area known as the Ogaden. At the time the recipient of substantial Soviet military aid, Somalia pressed for Cuban support in this dispute but Castro appears to have kept his distance, urging the Federation as the answer and perhaps waiting to see for himself how Ethiopia's new revolutionary government under Haile Mengistu Mariam (which had overthrown Haile Selassie on 2 February) turned out. Castro's opportunistic involvement in the Ogaden dispute would place him (and Cuba) in a position of great influence when the Somalis finally invaded Ogaden the following July, providing the opportunity for Cuba's second large-scale military intervention in Africa, this time in close co-ordination with the Soviet Union from its very inception (see below).

On 23 March 1977 Fidel Castro arrived in Angola for his first official visit, and over the following nine days he was fêted by the MPLA regime which had him to thank for its survival. The visit by the Cuban Head of State was intended as a follow-up to Neto's own visit to Havana the previous July – his first for a decade – and symbolised the revitalisation of the Cuban-MPLA relationship after its weakening in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During his visit Castro and Neto unveiled a commemorative plaque at Quifangondo,[38] the scene of Cuba's greatest military victory in the 'Second Liberation War', and on 27 March Castro spoke at a triumphant rally in Luanda to rapturous crowds. Beneath the veneer of triumphalism, however, Castro was actually planning to curtail the Cuban operation, and his decision to emphasise once more that Cuban troops had only intervened in Angola to save Luanda from capture by the South Africans may have been intended as a less-than-subtle hint to the MPLA regime that the Cuban operation had achieved its goal – and that it was now time to wind it up. In particular Castro must have been alarmed by Neto's public revelations the previous month of an alleged FNLA-Zairian-SADF plot to invade Cabinda and

[38] After unveiling the plaque, Castro was given a detailed first-hand account of the battle by the FAPLA Chief, 'Iko' Carreira, who had been defending Luanda at the time.

destabilize central Angola – 'Operation Cobra 77'.[39] For even if the rumours turned out to be false, they revealed one simple and painful underlying truth: that the FNLA had not been defeated and still posed a threat to the MPLA regime. This would not only make any Cuban withdrawal impossible, but might necessitate a further escalation in the Cuban military commitment to Angola, an outcome Castro was determined to avoid.

Thus when Castro met Neto for lengthy discussions at the Futungo de Belas palace, foremost in his mind was the need to speed up the Cuban withdrawal before the FAPLA began to rely on the Cuban presence as a permanent protective garrison. Castro therefore presented an ambitious withdrawal timetable to Neto which would reduce the entire Cuban contingent to only 15,000 men by the end of 1977, and 7,000 by 1978 (although he accepted that troop reductions might not go ahead quite as rapidly as planned). It was a bold attempt to take control of the interminable operation in Angola, but – as the MPLA's defeated opponents had discovered only two years before – the escalation of the war in Angola was beyond any one party's control, and Castro's dreams of reining in the Cuban operation were completely unrealistic. For not only were the original threats to the MPLA's power in Angola still present – UNITA, the FNLA and the SADF – but the Angolan conflict had now become inextricably tangled up with several other conflicts in the region and was beyond simple unilateral resolution.[40] It is thus strange that Castro – who was well aware of the destabilizing effect that 'Cobra 77' and 'Shaba I' (see next section) had had on Angola – should have doggedly clung onto the delusion that a Cuban withdrawal was still possible, confidently informing Eric Honecker a month later that the Cuban withdrawal programme was going ahead. Perhaps Castro's grasp of the politics of sub-Saharan Africa was actually far weaker than his regime has consistently boasted, and this may explain why it took him more than five years to

[39] According to Neto's statement on 24 February 1977, Operation Cobra 77 was to have involved an invasion by 1,800 FNLA troops under American & Zairian officers, the 'Ditrala' battalion of the Zairian army, and air support from F-104 amphibious fighter bombers which had been on standby at the American Kitona base since May 1975. The main target would be the Cabinda oil fields, but the SADF would also attack simultaneously along the Cunene border in order to cut the Benguela railway line and further destabilise Angola (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.218). Whether there was any truth in the rumours about Operation Cobra 77 is still not known, but what is certain is that no such invasion of Cabinda ever occurred.

begrudgingly accept that any withdrawal of Cuban military forces from Angola was out of the question if the MPLA was to remain in power.

During the talks Castro also raised the concerns of his commanders in Luanda over the conduct of the LCB, criticising the FAPLA's failure to take the UNITA threat seriously and complaining at the way Cuban troops were bearing the brunt of the fighting.[41] In particular Castro was anxious to avoid the negative publicity which could result from Cuban troops participating in counter-insurgent operations in which dozens of Angolan civilians were killed – including unarmed women and children – an all-too-common occurrence during the Angolan War.[42] Castro insisted that the FAPLA needed to be better organised and should play a more prominent role in the LCB over the coming months,[43] but when Neto suggested that the Cubans simply take over command of the entire FAPLA army themselves Castro resisted, fearful of upsetting his Soviet patrons who were not only supplying the vast majority of the weaponry for the Cuban operation, but who were also involved in strategic planning at the FAPLA's highest levels.[44] As Castro saw it, the Soviets would not take kindly to Cuba taking full control of the army they were bankrolling, and he could do little more than admonish Neto to involve the FAPLA more directly in operations against UNITA and take the threat posed by the guerrilla movement more seriously. Castro's warnings do not appear to have been heeded, however, and within five years they

[40] This concept would eventually find voice in Chester Crocker's 'linkage' (see Chapter 8).
[41] Fidel Castro gave a lengthy description of his talks with Neto to Eric Honecker in a subsequent visit to East Germany in early April 1977. He complained to the East German leader that "[i]t is difficult for us to fight against the bandits on our own. Our comrades have had a lot of difficulties and have spent many bitter hours fighting them. The Cubans cannot do it alone. Until now the Cuban units have been the only ones fighting the bandits. The major share must, however, be carried out by the Angolans themselves" (from CWIHP website).
[42] See next chapter for discussion of alleged Cuban war crimes committed in Angola.
[43] Castro told Honecker: "I spoke with Neto about the situation of the army and told him that things had to change. The Defence Minister [Cmdr. 'Iko' Carreira] is a good old fighter with the MPLA, but that hasn't helped. An army general staff does not really exist. The country may have 70,000 men under arms but the army is practically not organized... The state of the army unsettles us. In one region a brigade has been without a Commander or Chief of Staff for a long time" (CWIHP, op. cit.).
[44] Castro later admitted to Honecker that "[i]n practical terms [the Cubans taking over the running of the entire FAPLA army] might have been the best solution, but not politically. The Soviet Union is the chief weapons supplier and the Angolans must speak directly to the Soviets".

would come back to haunt the MPLA as the movement they had all but written off in March 1976 mounted a direct challenge to their power in Angola (see Chapter 8).[45]

**'Shaba I' – the Katangese invasion of Shaba province, 8 March 1977**

The other main issue on the agenda was the news that on 8 March a column of Katangese gendarmes had invaded Zaire's southern Shaba province from Angola, the so-called 'Shaba I' invasion. The Katangese force, numbering between 3,000 and 6,500 troops (estimates vary wildly), was itself a left-over from a previous African war – the Katanga Secession (1960-1963) – and had fled to Angola following the fall of its leader Moïse Tshombe. Once established in Angola the Katangese had been co-opted by the Portuguese authorities which used their presence on the Angola-Zaire border to deter Mobutu from increasing support for FLEC and the FNLA. With the collapse of Portuguese rule in early 1975 the Katangese threw in their lot with the MPLA, and many gendarmes saw action at Quifangondo, Luso (Luena) and Benguela, with mixed results.[46] Under the terms of the Neto-Mobutu Pact signed in February 1976 Neto had agreed to disband and repatriate the Katangese force, but with the FNLA still operating from bases inside Zaire Neto felt they were simply too useful a bargaining chip to give away, and throughout 1976 the FAPLA (and possibly some Cubans) continued to arm and train the Katangese in eastern Angola. The revelation of 'Operation Cobra 77' in February 1977 appears to have been the final catalyst which sparked off the invasion, although the possibility that the MPLA government fabricated 'Cobra 77' as a cover story for the invasion cannot be ruled out. The Katangese force invaded Shaba with four battalions and by early April was approaching Kolwesi (250 miles east of Luau), a strategically-vital town in southern Shaba.[47] At this point, however, France and Belgium airlifted in 1,500 Moroccan

[45] In fairness to the FAPLA and Cubans, the task of locating, isolating and destroying UNITA guerrillas was an almost impossible one given the enormous size of Angola's terrain. In Cuando Cubango alone there were over 75,000 square miles of territory (more than twice the size of Portugal) in which UNITA could manoeuvre, hide and re-build itself, and to this day no administration has ever managed more than a token presence in this province.

[46] Risquet (in Jaime & Barber, op. cit., pp.342-343) was dismissive of the Katangese troops who took part in the attack on Morro do Cal in October 1975, but another group at Luso (Luena) succeeded in turning back a UNITA column in late 1975, forcing it to retreat to Nova Lisboa (Huambo).

[47] The Katangese force – under Nathaniel Bumba – was officially named the FLNC (Front de Libération Nationale du Congo, National Liberation Front of the Congo).

troops to halt the advance, and in three weeks of heavy and extremely bloody fighting the Katangese were driven back over the border into Angola, the last elements withdrawing before the end of April.

The invasion caused an international crisis, and the Zairian and American governments immediately accused Cuba of masterminding it, an accusation Fidel Castro vehemently denied at his rally in Luanda. In an interview with Barbara Walters two months later he further insisted that Cuban military personnel had had no contact whatsoever with the Katangese since the war's completion, and that Cuba had "refused and avoided every form of commitment to and collaboration with the Katangese".[48] On balance Cuban denials appear to be genuine, for the timing of the invasion was acutely embarrassing to Castro – who was in the middle of his African tour – and threatened to undermine his legitimacy as a mediator in the Ogaden dispute. Given that he was seeking to speed up the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola at the time, it is inconceivable that he would have authorised the invasion at such a critical moment, especially as the only result of 'Shaba I' would be to further destabilise the Angola-Zaire border region and necessitate even more Cuban reinforcements – the diametrical opposite of what he was hoping to achieve in Angola. The MPLA, on the other hand, immediately gave its support to the FLNC, and from the available evidence it seems highly likely that they helped plan the invasion as a means of striking back at Mobutu's government for continuing to let FNLA guerrillas operate from bases inside Zaire. The underlying dispute between Neto and Mobutu still remained, however, and it would take a second invasion of Shaba by the Katangese (in May 1978) to bring both sides to their senses (see below).

## The return of factionalism in the MPLA & the rise of Nito Alves

During his talks with Castro, Neto also touched on an issue which had plagued the MPLA since its foundation twenty-one years previously: factionalism. As President

[48] Author's translation from Barbara Walters' interview with Fidel Castro (carried out on 19 May 1977), printed in the Cuban magazine Bohemia, dated 1 July 1977. The Cuban government did at one stage admit that some Cuban troops "may have crossed briefly into Zaire without authorisation" (quoted in Domínguez, To make the world safe for revolution, op. cit., p.138), but no solid evidence has to come to light that Cuban troops were operating alongside the Katangese during 'Shaba I'.

of the MPLA Neto had seen off numerous challenges to his authority from factions within the party – starting with Viriato da Cruz in 1963 and ending with the Eastern & Active Revolt factions in 1974 – but he had hoped that his re-election as President at the Inter-Regional Conference in September 1974 had served to heal all remaining divisions within the party. At that time the decolonisation of Angola was entering its most critical phase, and in the ensuing months all underlying enmities were briefly forgotten in the violent struggle for survival with the FNLA and UNITA. Once the 'Second Liberation War' started to draw to a close, however, these divisions began to surface once more, threatening to shatter the fragile party unity. Castro was only too sympathetic to Neto's plight – having seen off many challenges to his power over the years, the most controversial of which had been mounted by Aníbal Escalante's faction in 1968 (see Chapter 2) – but neither man appears to have realised just how serious a threat this final bout of factionalism would pose to Neto's leadership, or how profoundly it would effect the future of the party as a whole.[49]

The figurehead of the new faction was Alves Bernardo Baptista – aka 'Nito' Alves – the MPLA's Minister of Internal Administration and ironically the very man credited with having destroyed the last two challengers to Neto's power: the Eastern and Active Revolt factions.[50] Originally from the Dembos region (90 miles northeast of Luanda), he had become a member of the MPLA in October 1966, infiltrating the 1st Military Region where he joined the Cuban-trained 'Camilo Cienfuegos' Column which had arrived only a few months previously from Brazzaville. Over the years fighting in the Dembos Alves formed close friendships with many guerrillas who later went on to become co-conspirators, among them the 1st Military Region's commander 'Monstro Imortal', 'Bakalof' (Ernesto Gomes da Silva), and Bagé (later military chief of the Alves coup). Given the desperate conditions in the 1st Military Region – which was cut off from Brazzaville or Lusaka for years at a time – these men developed a strong sense of independence from the MPLA leadership as well as a fierce loyalty to

[49] I have based my account of the Nito Alves coup on a number of sources, principal among them 'The Twenty-Seventh of May, An Historical Note on the abortive 1977 coup in Angola' (from now on '27th May'), David Birmingham, African Affairs (Journal of the Royal African Society), Vol. 77, No.308, July 1978, pp.554-563, Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., pp.73-98, Khazanov, op. cit., pp.262-267, Rafael Moracén Limonta in Báez, op. cit., pp.265-267, & author's interview with Paulo Jorge (op. cit.).

each other.[51] Alves rose quickly through the MPLA's ranks and following the Carnation Revolution came into contact with the man who would later become his principal co-conspirator, José Van Dúnem. Van Dúnem was head of what was known as the 'São Nicolau Group', an equally select group of MPLA cadres who had served time together in the PIDE's harsh São Nicolau prison camp (in southern Angola) and who had their own grievances against the MPLA leadership.[52] By the time both Alves and Van Dúnem were elected to the MPLA Central Committee in September 1974 they had effectively become a separate clique within the party, and it was only a matter of time before they mounted a challenge to Neto's power.

The principal grievance of the Alves-Van Dúnem faction appears to have been quite straightforward – they were angry that their years of struggle in the 1st Military Region had not been recognised by the party, and they felt (perhaps with some justification) that they were being passed over when it came to the more senior party appointments.[53] Deep down, however, there was also a virulent strand of black racism pervading Alves' speeches and writings, and it is clear that Alves' group disliked the presence of so many whites, mestiços and former assimilados in the MPLA leadership, and was determined to see them removed.[54] The product of the

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[50] For a brief biography of Nito Alves' life, see preface to his collection of poetry Memória da longa resistência popular, África Editora, Lisbon, 1976, pp.9-16.

[51] In August 1976 Alves published his anthology of poetry – Memória da longa resistência popular ('Memoire of the Long Popular Resistance') – which was in fact a thinly-disguised political manifesto. The existence of a strong and independent Alves faction is abundantly clear from the book's dedication: "To the heroic People of the 1st Military Region/ to the sacrificed guerrillas/ to all my colleagues in arms and suffering/ Let us remember the glorious example/ of our companions cut down in battle... Let us follow their honourable and courageous example/ to the ultimate consequences of our political beliefs/ Let us honour the sacred 'maquis' oath we made" (author's translation).

[52] The aloofness of this group is noted by Birmingham ('27th May', op. cit., p.556) who states that: "Even in prison, their detractors claimed, they were a closed elitist group who could not transcend their petty bourgeois preconceptions and mix with prisoners of the truly exploited colonial classes."

[53] Bagé – who survived the coup and still lives in Luanda to this day – said in an interview in 1997 that veterans of the 1st Military Region were poorly represented in the government at the time, with only one Dembos man holding the rank of commander of a Military Region. According to Bagé, many of those who backed the coup did so because they felt they were being discriminated against by Neto's leadership (quoted in the FNLA's fortnightly bulletin 'Folha 8' entitled 'Era preciso o Holocausto?', 26 May 1998).

[54] Mestiços were Angolans of mixed white and African parentage. 'Assimilados' were for the most part Africans who – during the Portuguese colonial era – had adopted the Portuguese customs, manners and way of life in order to become acceptable to the colonial authorities, thus making them particularly hated by African nationalists. Marcum (The Angolan Revolution (1962-76), p.442, n246) notes that Alves "emerged in 1975 as an ambitious spokesman for black as against mestiço power and was regarded by some as second only to Neto in influence within the MPLA".

brutal and often savage war in the 1st Military Region, Alves was a very different man from Neto – a tough, hardened guerrilla leader who lacked Neto's intellectual acumen, foreign education and links with prominent African leaders[55] – and his radical vision for rapid economic and social development clashed head on with Neto's more pragmatic and balanced approach to governing Angola.[56] According to some sources, Alves was also determined to align Angola more closely with the Soviet Union – in opposition to Neto's policy of maintaining close economic links with the West (in particular for the export of Cabindan oil which provided nearly all of the government's hard currency revenue) – and the issue of the Soviet Union's knowledge of and possible complicity in Alves' coup remains highly controversial to this day (see below).[57]

Alves initially found a voice for his views in the many committees and discussion groups which sprang up in the months following the Carnation Revolution, among them the radical Comités Amílcar Cabral (CAC) and 'Henda Committees'. Then as head of the DOM/Nacional (Departamento da Organização das Massas) – a mass organisation he set up in late 1975 – he set about constructing a power base for his supporters, and under the influence of a talented Portuguese medical student, Cita Vales, the DOM lurched sharply to the left.[58] Alves also extended his political influence through the control of various regional newspapers (including the prestigious Diário de Luanda), two highly-popular (but also highly-inflammatory) radio programmes called 'Kudibanguela' and 'A voz do trabalhador' ('The Worker's

[55] Birmingham, '27th May', op. cit., p.555. In Birmingham's words: "His position was more that of a military captain who felt uncomfortable in the more suave cultural environment of the broad political leadership".

[56] In Klinghoffer's words (op. cit., p.128): "Neto was an intellectual and a pragmatic Marxist ideologist while Alves was a non-erudite populist with a fuzzy ideological platform".

[57] Alves was known to be energetically anti-Chinese (in order to show his support for the Soviet Union), and Neto's lack of criticism of China until after the death of Mao Zedong (in September 1976) may have been a further reason for Alves' opposition to Neto.

[58] Vales came to Angola in mid-1975 as part of PREC (Processo Revolucionário Em Curso), an organisation which aimed to help rebuild Angola after the devastating war. She had previously been associated with the Portuguese Communist Youth, and may have been responsible for the involvement of several white Portuguese Communists in the May 1977 coup. She is credited with introducing the ideologies of Enver Hoxha and Mao Zedong into the DOM, and with radicalising Alves and his followers. According to 'Folha 8' (op. cit.), she became Van Dúnem's lover and bore him a child (who is in his twenties today) shortly before the coup, but this may only be rumour. Most writers have tended to describe her as Alves' wife, although whether they were simply lovers rather than actually married is unclear.

Voice'),[59] and ownership of the Sambizanga football team.[60] By December 1975 – even as the war was raging on all fronts in Angola – Neto had become so concerned by the growth of divergent political tendencies in the MPLA that he spoke out against the rise of factionalism in the party, and moved to crush the more radical elements before they created another split. Initially Alves helped lead Neto's purge – closing down the CAC's and arresting the remaining members of Active Revolt – but Neto quickly realised that the most serious threat to his power came from Alves himself, and over the following months Neto sought to curb his growing influence.[61] Eventually in October 1976 – on his return from the Soviet Union where he had signed a generous Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Brezhnev[62] – Neto decided to remove Alves and his supporters from government for good.

## Neto attempts to purge Alves & Van Dúnem from the MPLA leadership (October 1976)

At a plenum meeting of the Central Committee Neto radically reorganised the MPLA, formally adopting Marxist-Leninism as the party's ideology and purging the Alves' faction from government. Alves' Ministry of Internal Administration was abolished, the pro-Alves Diário de Luanda was shut down, Cita Vales was removed from the DOM Secretariat and – at the Minister of Finance Saydi Mingas' insistence – Alves lost his seat in the Central Committee. Neto also ordered a Commission of Enquiry to be set up under José Eduardo dos Santos to investigate factionalism within the MPLA, with particular focus on the activities of the Alves faction (or 'Nitistas' as they called them). It was a bold attempt to crush the 'Nitistas' once and for all, but by ordering the Commission to report back at the end of March 1977 Neto had given Alves five months to regroup and plan his response, effectively setting a time-bomb under his

[59] At the time of the Transitional Government the *Kudibanguela* radio programme was extremely popular in the MPLA, and had been used to discredit UNITA by publicising letters which appeared in Caetano's memoires revealing Savimbi's close collaboration with the Portuguese.
[60] Sambizanga was a working-class suburb of Luanda and the source of massive grass-roots support for Alves. Football in Luanda was a deeply political activity, for under the Portuguese it had become the "white alternative to politics and also the black cover for some forms of resistance" (Birmingham, '27th May', op. cit., p.559).
[61] On 31 January 1976 Neto banned all pro-Alves radio programmes, and in May he saw off an attempt by Bakalof to take the Political Commissariat out of Neto's control.

own leadership.[63] By the time Castro arrived for his tour of Angola in March 1977 Neto was clearly anxious at how the 'Nitistas' would react to the Commission's report, and during his visit Castro was quick to note the growing political tension in Luanda. While in Luanda Castro was even approached by what he termed as 'opportunists' in the MPLA (i.e. 'Nitistas') who were seeking Cuban and Soviet support for their factions, a sure sign that Neto's grip on power was faltering.[64] Unsurprisingly, Castro rejected these advances out of hand – staunchly maintaining his support for Neto (just as he had during earlier leadership crises in the MPLA) – but the very fact the 'Nitistas' had dared to break ranks and seek his support should have alerted him to the fact that a coup attempt was not far off.[65]

In fact Alves and Van Dúnem may have been planning to launch a coup for over a year,[66] and as tensions mounted in Luanda following a series of heavy-handed house-to-house searches in Sambizanga in late May[67] – Alves' heartland of support – they

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[62] The treaty – signed on 8 October 1976 – was the first treaty the Soviet Union signed with a sub-Saharan African state, and reflected Angola's importance as a Soviet ally.

[63] Between October 1976 and the report's publication in May 1977 the Alves faction made several attempts to discredit the government. On 11 February 1977 Alves presented his official defence to the Commission – his 'Treze teses em minha defesa' ('Thirteen theses in my defence') – criticising the MPLA government for its gross mismanagement of the Angolan economy and its domination by whites and mestiços. Later that month there was then a massive scandal over national food distribution which led to the dismissal of the Minister for Internal Trade, 'Minerva' (David Aires Machado), a strong Alves supporter. There is strong disagreement, however, over whether Minerva was in fact guilty of corruption. According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.86) & Khazanov (op. cit., p.262), Minerva fabricated evidence of massive corruption in the state retail chain EMPA, blaming whites and mestiços in an effort to discredit the government, while Birmingham ('May 27th', op. cit., p.558) states that he was used as a scapegoat by the regime for the chronic food shortages which inevitably followed the end of the war.

[64] Castro mentioned this approach by the 'Nitistas' in his meetings with Erich Honecker one month later. The minutes from the meeting read as follows: "There are also opportunists in Angola, however. Sometimes they try to approach us or the Soviets and to spread certain opinions. We are very clearly taking a line in favour of Agostinho Neto. There is also evidence of black racism in Angola. Some are using the hatred against the colonial masters for negative purposes. There are many mulattos and whites in Angola. Unfortunately, racist feelings are spreading very quickly. Neto has taken a balanced position here, naming both whites and mulattos as ministers. Neto is of course ready to contribute to this question decisively. He is open to suggestions and arguments. The Defence Minister ['Iko' Carreira] is not as strong. He does not have high standards" (CWIHP, op. cit.).

[65] The 'Nitistas' may have also approached senior Soviet officials in search of support, among them President Podgorny who was the highest-ranking Soviet official ever to visit sub-Saharan Africa in early March 1977, shortly before Castro's visit.

[66] According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.78), Alves & Van Dúnem began plotting Neto's overthrow in March 1976 while in the Soviet Union attending the 25th Congress of the CPSU. Whether they discussed this with the Soviets is not recorded.

[67] The searches were allegedly for hoarded food, inflammatory literature & hidden dissidents (Birmingham, Frontline Nationalism, op. cit., p.79), but the locals' angry reaction soon spread to six other musseques, including Rangel, Operário and Prenda, and the disturbances had still not been

decided to strike before the Commission had a chance to publish its report. The Central Committee was due to meet to discuss the report's contents on 20 May 1977 (the meeting had been put back from late March due to Neto's state visits to Yugoslavia and Poland), and the conspirators saw this as the ideal opportunity to seize control of the government and arrest their opponents. However, a last-minute change of venue caught them off-guard,[68] and the meeting went ahead as planned at another venue with the Commission predictably accusing Alves and Van Dúnem of forming a faction within the MPLA. Alves attempted to fight his corner, accusing Neto of not being sufficiently pro-Soviet – an allegation Neto vehemently denied – but the Central Committee was against the 'Nitistas' and after twelve hours of heated debate they voted 26-6 to expel Alves and Van Dúnem from the party.[69] Neto knew this bold move against the 'Nitistas' would elicit a strong – possibly even violent – reaction, but he refused to believe they would go as far as launching a coup against him, and he clearly never imagined the bloodbath the 'Nitistas' were planning for their enemies in the party.[70] With the report's publication the following day Alves and Van Dúnem went into hiding, and in David Birmingham's oft-quoted phrase: "The stage was set for a *coup d'etat* which unrolled with incredible slowness, callous brutality and farcical incompetence over the next six days".[71]

The coup conspirators were nearly all former comrades from the 1st Military Region, and all stood to gain senior positions in the new 'Nitista' government once it took

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quelled by the time the Central Committee met. According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.87), Neto ordered an enquiry into the DISA's handling of the house-to-house searches which exonerated the search parties but did little to lessen the tensions in Luanda.

[68] The meeting was due to take place at the National Museum, but was changed to the Futungo de Belas Palace (probably due to Neto's fears for his own security). Most of the conspirators did not hear about this change, however, and turned up at the National Museum to find it deserted.

[69] According to Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.87), the Central Committee needed a 2/3 majority to expel Alves and Van Dúnem from the party. Saydi Mingas, Dangeureux and Onanbwe were in favour of the arrest and trial of Alves & Van Dúnem, a fact which may have singled them out for elimination in the subsequent coup attempt.

[70] The Head of Neto's personal bodyguard – Gen. Rafael Moracén Limonta – later noted that by May 1977 there were rumours that a coup d'état was about to be launched, but Neto refused to believe the 'Nitistas' would go that far (in Báez, op. cit., p.265). Neto did however take some precautions, on 21 May ordering all FAPLA units to be ready to break up any pro-Alves demonstrations which he expected to occur over the following days (Khazanov, op. cit., p.264).

[71] Birmingham, '27th May', op. cit., p.555.

power.[72] The 'Nitistas' could count on the support of several FAPLA units in Luanda – the most significant of which was the 8th Brigade[73] – and planned to bring thousands of their own supporters out into the streets in support of the coup. The plan involved a dawn attack on the São Paulo prison to free political prisoners, after which they would seize the national radio station and announce the overthrow of Neto's government, calling for a massive public demonstration in support of Alves and Van Dúnem. 'Nitista' death squads would then round up and eliminate specific members of the MPLA government (although Neto was initially to be spared), and then as crowds gathered at the Government Palace Monstro Imortal and Bakalof would call for the resignation of Neto and his government, after which Alves would be proclaimed the new president and martial law declared. The 'Nitistas' set 25 May as the proposed date for the coup, but for some as yet unclear reason the army failed to act and a second attempt was set for 28 May. However, this date too had to be changed when on 26 May one of the key conspirators – Pedro Fortunato – was dismissed from his post as Luanda's Provincial Commissioner, prompting fears that a purge against them had begun,[74] and on the morning of 27 May the 'Nitistas' launched their coup.

**Alleged Soviet complicity in the Alves coup**

Alleged Soviet involvement in the Nito Alves coup is highly controversial, and to this day there is still fierce debate over whether the Soviets were aware of – or even gave support to – Alves' plans. There is no doubt that Alves had close links to the Soviet Union – he was a frequent visitor to their Embassy in Luanda and his desire to see the MPLA aligned more closely with the Soviets was well-known (and may have been one of the reasons why a group of white Portuguese Communists threw in their lot

[72] The new government would be as follows: Nito Alves – President; José Van Dúnem – Prime Minister; Monstro Imortal – Minister of Defence; Bakalof – FAPLA Chief of Staff; Eduardo 'Juka' Valentim – Minister of Information; Betinho – Minister of Education; Sihanouk – Chief of DISA; Pedro Fortunato – Co-ordinator of Provincial Commissioners; Aristides Van Dúnem – Labour Portfolio (Khazanov, op. cit., p.265 & Wolfers and Bergerol, op. cit., p.90).

[73] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.91) state that the FAPLA 9th Brigade mutinied in favour of 'Nitistas', but they appear to be mistaken as Moracén – who was involved in recapturing the mutinous brigade's barracks – quite clearly identifies them as the 8th Brigade (in Báez, op. cit., p.267).

[74] In the week leading up to the coup eleven Alves supporters were also arrested, further convincing the 'Nitistas' that the coup had to be launched immediately.

with the conspirators).[75] What is less clear is whether he told the Soviets of his plans to overthrow Neto's government, and more importantly whether these plans received their blessing. The Soviets had certainly shown only lukewarm support for Neto's leadership over the years, and had been happy to flirt with challengers to Neto's authority who were more amenable to their viewpoint – most notably Daniel Chipenda. Furthermore, Neto was fiercely protective of Angola's independence and had on several occasions clashed violently with his Soviet patrons in his determination to maintain it,[76] and it is quite possible that in Nito Alves the Soviets saw a more obedient client who could better serve their interests in Angola. But if they did indeed know about the coup beforehand, it appears they decided to let matters run their course, anxious not to upset their Cuban allies whose dogged loyalty to Neto was constantly emphasised in their meetings with the Soviets.[77] In fact so concerned had Fidel Castro been for Neto's personal safety that he set up an elite Cuban Presidential Guard to protect him at all times, under the command of Gen. Rafael Moracén Limonta, himself a veteran of the 1965 Brazzaville operation and a trusted ally of Neto. Decisive action by this Cuban force would be crucial in saving Neto's government (and life) when the coup finally came.

**The Nito Alves coup attempt, 27 May 1977**

The coup began at 4am on 27 May 1977 when a detachment of ten armoured cars from the mutinous FAPLA 8th Brigade under Monstro Imortal attacked the São Paulo prison in Luanda, killing the prison warder Helder Neto and releasing over 150 prisoners, among them eleven Alves supporters who had been arrested the previous

[75] Cita Vales' close links with the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) had brought them into contact with Nito Alves, and Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.128) suggests that his virulent pro-Soviet line was what persuaded them to give their backing to the coup.

[76] Paulo Jorge (in interview) remembers that at a particularly tense moment in negotiations with the Soviets, Neto had shouted out: "We didn't fight for independence to submit ourselves to you", a clear sign of his determination not to become an obedient Soviet satellite. Throughout his tenure as President of the MPLA Neto strove to base Angolan-Soviet relations on reciprocal interests, and despite the mammoth military aid he received from the Soviets he refused multiple requests for Soviet bases in Angola. See Neto's meeting with the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Luanda on 1 March 1976 in Westad (op. cit.).

[77] Westad (op. cit.) notes that the Cubans "missed no opportunity to impress the Soviets with their view that the MPLA president was the only solution to Angola's leadership problems, well knowing of Moscow's suspicions of him".

week.[78] The force then moved on to the radio station which it captured around 7am, immediately broadcasting that the government had been overthrown by the 'MPLA Action Committee', and ordering all citizens to congregate in front of the Presidential Palace for a mass demonstration in support of Nito Alves. Neto however was no longer at the Presidential Palace, for several days earlier Moracén – who had heard rumours that a coup was imminent – persuaded him to move temporarily to the Ministry of Defence, a decision Neto only accepted under duress.[79] Loyal officers therefore set up their headquarters there, but in the rush to call in reinforcements three senior FAPLA officers did not realise that the FAPLA 8th Brigade was under the control of the 'Nitistas', and two of them – Comandantes Bula and Dangereux – were taken captive as they entered the barracks.[80] By 10am large crowds of Alves supporters were converging on the Presidential Palace, and at Neto's insistence Moracén ordered a Cuban unit based in Vidrul (on the outskirts of Luanda) to advance into the city immediately and prevent the Palace's capture. Moracén led the force in himself from the edge of the city (leaving the Cuban tank company in Sambizanga as a reserve), and once the Palace was reinforced he set out to recapture the radio station.

By the time the FAPLA-Cuban force arrived in trucks at the radio station, nearly 300 civilians had gathered at the front entrance which was being guarded by a large group of 'Nitista' soldiers and a lone BRDM. There was brief confusion over which soldiers were 'Nitistas' and which were pro-government (as both sides were wearing the same uniforms), but eventually a massive fire-fight broke out which lasted for twenty minutes, Moracén finally leading a platoon of 15 Cubans through the back gate to capture the building and disarm the defenders inside. Fighting off a brief counter-attack by the 'Nitistas', Moracén called 'Furry' and asked him to send in the Cuban tank company, and their arrival half an hour later secured the radio station for the government and deterred any further attempts by the 'Nitistas' to retake the

[78] Among the prisoners released were 30 FNLA and UNITA officials, although surprisingly the dozen or so British and American mercenaries in the prison declined the opportunity to escape, preferring to stay in the prison for their own safety.
[79] According to Moracén (in Báez, op. cit., p.265), Neto did not believe that the 'Nitistas' would go as far to launch a coup against him, and only agreed to leave the Presidential Palace on the condition that it was properly protected. To reassure Neto, Moracén ordered the Presidential Guard to be reinforced with two companies of Cubans.
[80] The FAPLA Chief of Staff, Comandante Xietu, narrowly escaped capture.

building. Striding into the recording studio at the head of his troops, Moracén grabbed the microphone from the presenter (who was in the middle of reading a biography of Nito Alves) and forced him to say 'Viva Neto!', but the presenter was too terrified to say anything more, and Moracén ended up making the announcement that the radio station was back in government hands himself (in faltering 'Portuñol'). Shortly after the tank company arrived – made up of 15 FAPLA and 4 Cuban tanks – a detachment was sent to recapture the barracks of the mutinous 8th Brigade, and this was completed (without much bloodshed) by 1:30pm, officially ending the coup.[81]

Moracén's decisive action had been pivotal in crushing the coup attempt, and once the radio station began transmitting pro-Neto announcements many of the conspirators – including Bakalof and Alves – realised that the coup had failed, and began making their escape. But the failed coup was to have a nasty sting in its tail, for during the siege of the 8th Brigade the 'Nitistas' had successfully smuggled out seven senior MPLA and FAPLA members (who had been captured in the early hours of the coup) and spirited them away to a safe house in Sambizanga. All seven had been among dozens of names on death lists drawn up by the 'Nitistas' in the days leading up to the coup, and included Alves' old rivals from the Central Committee – Saydi Mingas and Comandante N'zaji – as well as senior members from the FAPLA General Staff – Comandantes Bula and Dangereux.[82] All seven were tied up, taken to an out-house and machine-gunned, the seventh man – Comandante Gato – miraculously surviving the hail of bullets and managing to crawl to the port where Cuban workers came to his aid.[83] News of the killings deeply shocked Neto, as it did the Cuban commanders who knew many of those killed personally, and as details of the true extent of the blood-letting planned by the 'Nitistas' leaked out, Neto ordered a massive round-up of

[81] Outside Luanda there were scattered mutinies in support of the 'Nitistas', but all were put down easily. In Luena an attempted mutiny by a group of 'Nitista' FAPLA officers was quickly suppressed, and in Kuito-Bié two officers were arrested as they tried to take over the local radio station (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.95).

[82] The seven were as follows: Saydi Mingas, Minister of Finance; António Garcia Neto, Director of International Cooperation; Comandante N'zaji, Chief of DISA; Comandante Dangereux, FAPLA Chief of Staff; Comandante Bula, FAPLA Deputy Chief of Staff; Comandante Eurico, from the FAPLA General Staff; and Comandante Gato, Director of the Port of Luanda (who miraculously survived).

[83] Gato returned with a Cuban force to the house in Sambizanga to find the bodies of two other men who had opposed the killings – João Rodrígues (a FAPLA soldier) and Cristino Santos (a Sambizanga activist) (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.94).

suspected 'Nitistas', promising swift and decisive retribution against those involved in the killings.[84] Deeply shaken by the loss of so many of his closest comrades – and painfully aware of how close he had come to death himself – Neto determined to tackle the chronic problem of factionalism in the MPLA once and for all, and set about on a radical purge of the military and political system of the PRA.

## Aftermath of the Nito Alves coup

It is no exaggeration to say that the Alves coup attempt was the most serious crisis in the MPLA's history, and within hours of re-taking power Neto ordered a round-up of suspected 'Nitistas' in the military, political and civilian population. Tens of thousands of Angolans were arrested over the following weeks – many from Alves' heartland of support in Sambizanga – and a nationwide manhunt was launched to capture the coup leaders.[85] Most of the conspirators had gone into hiding in their homeland of support – the 1st Military Region – but over the following months they were all apprehended, Bakalof being the last ringleader to be captured on 9 November 1977.[86] They were tried in secret by the Minister of Defence, 'Iko' Carreira, and all were summarily executed by firing squad, although the Angolan government has still not made an official announcement on when the executions took place, or where the

[84] On the evening of the coup Neto made an announcement on national radio which revealed his vengeful tone at the time: "Some of those who participated in this crime are already under arrest. We will shortly announce what action shall be taken against these individuals. We will certainly not waste time with lengthy trials. We will pass immediate sentence. We will do this as quickly as possible so that these problems can be resolved and we will make our decisions according to Revolutionary Law" (author's translation of text quoted in 'Folha 8', op. cit., p.7).

[85] According to the FNLA (in 'Folha 8', op. cit.), over 30,000 Angolans were killed in the purge following the 27 May coup, many of them being shot in mass executions (the last of which took place on 23 March 1978) and buried in mass graves. The FNLA also allege that between 27 and 29 May 1977 30,000-40,000 Angolans were arrested in Sambizanga and carted off for questioning by the DISA, and that on 28 May FAPLA tanks destroyed a dozen houses belonging to Alves supporters in the district. The MPLA government has flatly denied that 30,000 Angolans 'disappeared' during the purge, but on 10 April 1992 it did eventually admit that "regrettable excesses" ("excessos lamentáveis") had occurred and promised to set up a Commission to investigate all alleged disappearances. However, with the outbreak of war in November 1992 the idea was shelved, and no official enquiry has yet been carried out into the purges following the Alves coup.

[86] Van Dúnem and Cita Vales were the first to be captured when they were found hiding in a barn in the Dembos. Then on 7 July Alves was arrested by villagers in his home town, allegedly hiding up a tree. Ratliff (op. cit., p.147) claims that Alves was found hiding in the Soviet military mission in Luanda, but this story is not supported by any other source. Bakalof was finally arrested in the Palanca suburb of Luanda where he lived.

bodies were buried.[87] A wide-ranging purge of the political establishment followed – with the dismissal of six of the PRA's sixteen Provincial Commissioners and the closure of seven of Luanda's twenty CPB's (local popular committees) – the net effect of the coup murders, subsequent executions and suspensions reducing the Central Committee by a third.[88] To purge the military, a special court martial was convened to try conspirators in the FAPLA, and thirteen officers were stripped of their ranks – among them Monstro Imortal, Bakalof and Alves himself. Neto even set up a board of inquiry to investigate the involvement of Portuguese Communists in the coup, and this led to the deportation of nine Portuguese nationals in June, among them the editor of the pro-Alves Diário de Luanda.[89]

The Cuban government reacted to the coup with a characteristic show of solidarity, Raúl Castro flying to Luanda on 12 June to demonstrate physically his support for Neto's regime. Recognising the MPLA government's temporary weakness – and the danger that disaffected elements in the FAPLA and government could take advantage of this to launch a second coup (Alves, Van Dúnem and Bakalof were still at large at this time) – he immediately promised a massive reinforcement in the Cuban garrison to bolster Neto's regime, increasing the Cuban military presence by a further 4,000 troops.[90] This increase in Cuban troops put paid to the ambitious withdrawal plans Fidel Castro had outlined in March, but the reinforcements were intended (as at every stage in the Cuban operation in Angola) only as a temporary measure, and both Castro

[87] Neto hinted that they had been executed in a speech given on 1 August 1977, declaring that "once the assassinations were begun, particularly here in Luanda, of comrades who were killed for clear tactical objectives, those individuals were also shot" (quoted in Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.97). Paulo Jorge (in interview) confirmed that Van Dúnem, Cita Vales and Nito Alves were all executed by firing squad, although he was unsure on which date this occurred, further proof of the veil of secrecy the MPLA hierarchy put over the fate of the conspirators.

[88] Three Central Committee members were murdered during the coup, five were arrested and shot for complicity in the coup, and two (Aristides Van Dúnem, the former Trades Union Secretary General, & Armando Xi-Cota) were suspended in August 1977 for complicity in the coup. Minerva was also dismissed from his post and was, in Birmingham's opinion made the "scapegoat for the disintegration of essential economic services [in Angola]" (Frontline Nationalism, op. cit., p.78).

[89] The board was made up of three leading Angolan intellectuals – Manuel Rui Monteiro, Ndunduma (editor of the Jornal de Angola) and Pepetela (who was Deputy Minister of Education at the time).

[90] Jay Mallin Sr, Cuba in Angola, Research Institute for Cuban Studies, University of Miami, 1987, p.9. LeoGrande (in Mesa Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.30) states that this increased the Cuban presence to 19,000 troops, but it is probable that there were significantly more troops in Angola at the time. If troop levels had stood at 36,000 at the end of the 'Second Liberation War' and had only been reduced at a trickle over the previous year, it is fair to assume that in May 1977 there were anywhere between

brothers clearly believed that they could restart the withdrawal programme once the security situation had improved. In thanks for the Cuban help which had once more saved his government (and was continuing to prop it up), in August Neto made a private visit to Cuba, accompanied by Raúl Castro who was returning from his own African tour. The third occasion in only five months on which the senior leadership of the Cuban and Angolan governments had met at length, Neto's August visit to Cuba symbolised the closeness of the MPLA-Cuban relationship at the time and made all the more difficult dealing with the thorniest issue raised by the Alves coup: namely the possibility of Soviet involvement which – if true – suggested that Cuban and Soviet priorities were dangerously at odds in Angola.

Suspicions that the Soviets had been in close contact with the conspirators were raised when Cita Vales sought help from the Soviet Embassy once the coup had failed,[91] and they were further fuelled by the muted reaction of the Soviet press to news of the coup, Pravda failing to denounce the 'Nitistas' until 5 June.[92] Soviet inaction during the coup contrasted sharply with the Cubans whose rapid intervention in Luanda had been crucial in crushing the coup. For not only had Moracén's insistence that Neto move out of the Presidential Palace prevented his capture (and probable death) at the hands of the 'Nitistas', but his troops' recapture of the radio station had convinced the local population that the government was back in control and triggered the flight of most of the conspirators.[93] The possibility that Neto's Soviet patrons had at the very least been aware that a coup was imminent (and had done nothing to warn him of this) was – to put it mildly – alarming, and the cooling-off in Angolan-Soviet relations over

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25,000 and 30,000 Cuban troops in Angola. During his visit Raúl Castro also announced scholarships for 2,000 Angolan students to attend school and university in Cuba.

[91] Wolfers & Bergerol (op. cit., p.96) note that one member of Neto's presidential staff – Maria da Costa Veloso – was later dismissed after Cita Vales tried to send a message through her to the Soviet Embassy asking for assistance for her and Van Dúnem to flee Angola.

[92] On 28 May Pravda merely repeated Luanda radio's report on the coup but made no comment of its own, and continued to repeat Neto's statements for the following two days. Only on 31 May did it refer to the 'Nitistas' as 'splittists' – the same day that Brezhnev sent a telegramme to Neto congratulating him on stopping the 'anti-government action' – and it was not until 5 June that Pravda denounced their action against Neto (Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.129).

[93] Domínguez (in Mesa-Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.126) initially suggested that the Cuban response "appears to have suffered from organizational disarray" and that "at least some Cuban officials in the field supported the Alves coup", but later retracted this statement (To make a world safe for revolution, op. cit., p.159). noting that suggestions that Cuban support for Neto during the coup had been lukewarm were without foundation.

the following months probably reflected the MPLA leadership's genuine mistrust of Soviet motivations in Angola. Despite attempts by both the Angolan and Soviet governments to quash any suggestion of Soviet complicity in the coup,[94] it is clear that Neto (and most of the surviving leadership) was convinced that the Soviets had been involved in some way, and this realisation convinced Neto that he needed to harmonise MPLA, Soviet and Cuban policies in Angola if such a debacle were not to occur again.

## Neto reforms the MPLA – the First Party Congress (4-10 December 1977)

Neto's confidence in his ability to lead the MPLA had been shaken to the core, and in recognition of the divisions running through the party – and of just how narrowly a bloodbath of the party faithful had been averted – he initiated a programme of radical party reform which over the next six months transformed the MPLA into a model Communist party. By now diagnosed with cancer (over the following two years he would visit the Soviet Union on several occasions for extensive treatment), Neto was determined before he died to reform the party he had led for fifteen years and resolve its chronic divisions once and for all.[95] Modelling his approach on Cuba's own recent 'Institutionalisation' process, Neto adopted the standard Communist party structure, dogma and Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, purging many of the old guard and replacing them with the leaders of a new generation of MPLA politicians (the young José Eduardo dos Santos was promoted while veterans of the 1960s like Lúcio Lara fell from favour). Anxious to repair Angola's damaged relationship with the Soviet Union, in September Neto visited Moscow where he held lengthy discussions with

[94] Neto switched from labelling the 'Nitistas' 'ultra-leftists' to referring to them as 'rightist bandits' and eventually 'right-wing imperialists'. Neto's change in tone probably reflected his desire not to publicly implicate the Soviet Union in the coup, but it is clear from many sources (e.g. Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.130 & Paulo Jorge in interview) that he was privately convinced the Soviets had been involved. Pravda similarly referred to the 'Nitistas' as 'rightist' when – aside from the racial tone of their politics – they were fundamentally more pro-Soviet and 'ultra-leftist' than Neto. By the time Khazanov produced his authorised hagiography of Neto in 1986, the Nitista coup was referred to as an "anti-government revolt [which] was part of a broad imperialist plot against the young republic", with no mention of any possible Soviet involvement (op. cit., p.267).

[95] As part of his determination to look past MPLA divisions in the face, Neto fought for (and finally authorised) the publication of Pepetela's Mayombe, a book considered too controversial for publication owing to its frank discussion of ethnic and ideological divisions within the MPLA. The first edition of the book finally came out in 1980, shortly after Neto died.

Brezhnev and Kosygin, and following a subsequent visit a month later by Lopo do Nascimento, Neto was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize, signalling the Soviets' renewed support for his leadership.[96] By the time the First Party Congress opened on 4 December the old MPLA – with its characteristic divisions, diversity of ideologies and membership – had been transformed into the MPLA-Partido Trabalhador (MPLA-Workers' Party), ushering in a new era of politics in Angola. During the week-long Congress Cuba and the Soviet Union were represented by Raúl Castro and Andrei Kirilenko respectively, the presence of the second highest ranking members of the Cuban and Soviet governments symbolising the renewed Cuban-Soviet alliance in support of Neto.

## The Cuban intervention in Ethiopia, December 1977

Raúl Castro's presence in Angola may have masked a hidden purpose, however, for throughout 1977 Cuba had gradually become drawn into the increasingly bloody conflict over Ethiopia's Ogaden region, and by December was on the verge of launching its second large-scale military intervention in Africa.[97] Since Fidel Castro's mediation in the territorial dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia in March 1977, relations between the two countries had deteriorated sharply, and on 17 July Somalia launched an invasion of Ogaden with 40,000 troops and 250 tanks, hoping to capitalise on the weakness of new regime in Addis Ababa. Denouncing the Somali aggression, Havana sought to improve its relations with Mengistu's revolutionary government, and it eventually agreed to send a team of Cuban military instructors to Ethiopia, 200 of whom were operating there by September. In reaction to the burgeoning Cuban and Soviet alliance with Mengistu, on 13 November Mogadishu expelled all Cuban and Soviet personnel from Somalia, producing one of the most bizarre moments in the Cold War when – literally overnight – Somalia and Ethiopia swapped sides, Soviet and Cuban personnel in Mogadishu effectively changing places with their American counterparts in Addis Ababa. Nine days later Somalia launched

[96] Westad also notes that as a result of substantial Soviet pressure Zambia's President Kaunda was persuaded to recognise the PRA, a major regional victory for the MPLA (Westad, op. cit.).

[97] For a full account of the Cuban-Soviet intervention in Ethiopia in 1977/78, see Nelson P Valdés, 'Cuba y la guerra entre Somalia y Etiopía', Estudios de Ásia y África, Vol. XIV, No. 2, El Colegio de México, Mexico, April-June 1979, pp.244-266.

a new offensive in the Ogaden which quickly overwhelmed the Ethiopian army, and after several desperate requests for Cuban help on 21 December Fidel Castro finally agreed to send in Cuban troops. Unlike Operation Carlota, however, the intervention in Ethiopia would be a joint Cuban-Soviet operation from the start, the Soviets handling the transport of the troops and heavy equipment to Ethiopia while the Cubans carried out the main fighting on the ground.

To assemble the Cuban force (which would eventually number 17,000 men), troops would need to be drawn not only from Cuba but from the two main Cuban missions in Congo-Brazzaville and Angola. Angola – which had the lion's share of Cuban military personnel in Africa – would provide a large contingent,[98] but this was a risky strategy as the Cuban commanders were not entirely confident about Angola's own security at the time. In particular the Cuban government was concerned by rumours that the Katangese were planning to launch a second invasion of Shaba province, the inevitable effect of which would be to further destabilise Angola and necessitate yet more Cuban reinforcements, potentially jeopardising the Ethiopian operation. By late February 1978 – with the fighting in Ogaden reaching a critical phase – Fidel Castro was sufficiently concerned to send Jorge Risquet to Luanda to ask Neto to curtail Katangese activities in Angola, at least until the Ethiopian campaign was over.[99] That the Cubans should have requested help from the MPLA government in restraining the Katangese suggests not only how little involvement the Cubans had with the exile force, but more importantly that the MPLA had the controlling interest over them. Risquet's request appears to have been granted, for it was not until May that the long-awaited 'Shaba II' invasion finally occurred (see below), by which time the Somalis had been driven out of the Ogaden for good. On 5 March the Cuban-Ethiopian force – commanded by the popular Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez – captured the vitally-important Jijiga and Marda Passages on the Somali border, and three days later the Somalis were forced to withdraw completely from the Ogaden.

[98] No figures are as yet available on the exact number of Cuban troops sent from Angola to fight in Ethiopia, but the number was probably in the region of 5,000 men.
[99] Domínguez, To make the world safe for revolution, op. cit., pp.138 & 156.

Cuba's resounding success in Ethiopia – its second major military intervention in Africa in only three years – further boosted Castro's prestige in Africa, and raised alarm in the new Carter administration which feared it would be followed by a rash of further Cuban interventions across Africa. The Americans needn't have worried, however, as the Cuban government was not keen to escalate its military involvement any further, and following the expulsion of the Somalis from the Ogaden Castro refused to let his forces get involved in Addis Ababa's internal war against the Eritrean secessionists, despite a visit in person by Mengistu to request Cuban military assistance.[100] Ultimately it appears that Castro was not prepared to wage war against the very Eritrean guerrillas Cuban instructors had trained during Haile Selassie's reign, and instead he attempted to persuade Mengistu to find a political solution to the Eritrean insurgency, whilst gradually reducing the Cuban military contingent from 17,000 to around 3,000 by the mid-1980s.[101] Castro's decision to keep Cuba out of the Eritrean war would prove a wise one, as Ethiopia quickly got bogged down in fighting in the border region, eventually losing control of Eritrea which became independent in 1993.

## The 'Cassinga Raid', May 1978

Any fears Washington might have had that Cuba would now attempt to extend its military power into other parts of Africa were quickly laid to rest, however, when in May 1978 the SADF launched a dramatic strike into southern Angola, throwing Angola's security into chaos once more, and putting paid once and for all to Castro's withdrawal plans. South African incursions into southern Angola had been on the increase since early 1977 when SWAPO – revitalised by dozens of new Cuban and Soviet-run training camps – had stepped up its operations in Namibia, and following a major skirmish between SWAPO and the SADF in late October 1977 (which ended

[100] On 22 April 1978 Mengistu arrived in Havana for talks with Fidel Castro during which he tried to persuade the Cuban leader to provide Cuban troops for the planned Ethiopian offensive against Eritrea. He was unsuccessful, however, and the proposed offensive went ahead on 15 May without official Cuban backing.

[101] In early 1980 the Cuban troop withdrawal began, dropping to 11,000 troops by 1982, 8,000 by 1983, and a little over 3,000 by 1984. The last 3,609 were withdrawn from October to November 1989 during 'Operación Solidaridad', perhaps contributing to the fall of Mengistu's regime in May 1991 (figures from Duncan, op. cit., p.135 & Báez, op. cit., p.213).

14 miles inside Angola's borders),[102] the SADF officially requested permission from Prime Minister Vorster to launch a raid against SWAPO's southern Angolan camps.[103] Fully aware of the military infrastructure SWAPO was constructing in southern Angola – enabling it to infiltrate northern Namibia along a border 1,000 miles long – the SADF was keen to strike at SWAPO's main camps at Cassinga and Chetequera (200 miles and 17 miles north of the Namibian border respectively) in order to crush the nascent insurgency before it got off the ground. In December Vorster – who was still licking his wounds from the last Angolan debacle – begrudgingly authorised the raid which was code-named 'Operation Reindeer', and throughout early 1978 the SADF worked frantically preparing what would turn out to be its most successful (and most controversial) Angolan operation.[104]

Operation Reindeer would involve a simultaneous double assault against the two SWAPO bases: one force of 257 paratroopers (under Combat-Group Bravo's former commander Jan Breytenbach) would be dropped on 'Moscow' (the SWAPO code-name for the Cassinga camp) which they would destroy before withdrawing by helicopter; meanwhile, a second mechanised force would attack 'Vietnam' (SWAPO's Chetequera camp) overland from Namibia, before withdrawing in the evening (see map).[105] According to subsequent South African accounts, aerial reconnaissance revealed that both camps were well-defended – with trench networks, bunkers and AA defences – and were being used either for training SWAPO cadres (Cassinga) or as transit camps for guerrillas before they infiltrated Namibia

[102] Geldenhuys, op. cit., p.79. Geldenhuys describes the three-day running battle as "the closest to a full-scale battle that had taken place in South West [Africa, i.e. Namibia] since 1915". According to him, two SWAPO bases were destroyed and 61 guerrillas killed for a loss of six SADF killed.
[103] Valdés (in 'Cuba y Angola: Una Política de Solidaridad Internacional', op. cit., p.665), puzzlingly notes that on 31 May 1977 an SADF force crossed the border from Namibia and captured Cuangar, Mucusso and Calai (all along Cuando Cubango's border with Namibia) before handing them over to UNITA, but no other source makes any reference to this alleged incursion. Possibly the dates have been confused with the SADF's subsequent invasion four years later (Operation Protea) during which the above towns were indeed captured and handed over to UNITA.
[104] According to Steenkamp (op. cit., p.71), Vorster "was not wildly enthusiastic about taking the war into Angola. He was not a daring innovator by nature, and he had not forgotten the costs, in terms of wasted effort and world opprobrium, of Operation Savannah". Nevertheless his authorisation for Operation Reindeer was "a landmark decision, a watershed which would have as great an effect on the border war as the withdrawal from Angola in 1976 which had presented SWAPO with its safe border".
[105] Reindeer also had a subsidiary third target – Charlie – which was a series of small SWAPO bases 10-15 miles east of Chetequera. These were attacked by part of the SADF mechanised force which broke off from the main group as it approached Chetequera.

(Chetequera).[106] In the weeks following the attack SWAPO would however fiercely deny this, insisting that Cassinga was not a military base but a refugee camp full of unarmed refugees, old people and children. The South Africans planned a swift and violent attack, the element of surprise giving the SADF paratroopers the advantage over the defenders who would outnumber them at least five-to-one. At Cassinga the South African commanders would also have to be careful to avoid drawing in a nearby Cuban mechanised infantry battalion (less than ten miles to the south at Tchamutete), as any Cuban involvement in the fighting could seriously hamper their withdrawal.

At 8am on 4 May 1978 the assault began with an air strike against 'Moscow' (Cassinga) by SAAF bombers.[107] Timed to coincide with the camp's morning parade, the air attack with Alpha and 1,000lb bombs caused devastating casualties among the hundreds of people gathered in the central square, temporarily paralysing the camp's defences. SADF paratroopers (who had accidentally been dropped over a mile from the camp) then assaulted the camp from the south, killing many of the shocked survivors and destroying all the military supplies they came across. Around 2pm the withdrawal by helicopter began, but at this point a Cuban force from the Tchamutete camp – which had itself been hit by stray SAAF bombs – launched a counter-attack along the main road, threatening to cut off the SADF's withdrawal.[108] SAAF Buccaneers and Mirages were immediately called in to bomb the attacking column, and at least 60 Cubans were killed when their vehicles – which were perilously exposed in the middle of the road – were hit by a combination of air-to-ground missiles, bombs and small arms fire from the paratroopers.[109] The Cuban attack

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[106] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.76, & author's interview with Helmoed-Römer Heitman, Cape Town (RSA), 22 November 1998.

[107] My account of the raid on Cassinga and Chetequera is taken from Steenkamp (op. cit., pp.71-80), Geldenhuys (op. cit., pp.90-94), Rey (op. cit., p.232), author's interview with Cuban veteran stationed in Otchinjau during Cassinga attack (Havana, 21 September 1999) & author's interview with Heitman.

[108] The Cuban attack was particularly worrying for the SADF as Constand Viljoen – Chief of the SADF – had flown in for the closing stages of the operation and might (at least in theory) have been captured (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.77).

[109] The death of so many Cubans near Cassinga on 4 May 1978 has been omitted from all official Cuban accounts of the war (for example, Rey, op. cit., p.232, refers only to Cuban forces rushing to Cassinga to prevent the SADF from finishing off the SWAPO wounded, but makes no mention of any Cuban casualties sustained in the engagement). However one Cuban veteran – an ex-FAR officer who commanded a gun emplacement at Otchinjau during the attack on Cassinga – revealed to me (in interview) that at least 60 Cubans were killed in a reckless attack along the main road from

disintegrated and the SADF force was able to withdraw in good order, the last paratroopers reaching Namibia by early evening. The attacking force had sustained three killed, eleven wounded and one MIA (who was never seen again).[110] Behind them they left over 600 bodies of what they claimed were SWAPO combatants, and at least 340 wounded.[111] The simultaneous attack against 'Vietnam' (which received less publicity) was also a walk-over, the SADF force losing just two killed and 16 wounded before they withdrew, taking over 200 prisoners with them and leaving behind 250 SWAPO dead.[112]

Operation Reindeer was to be the SADF's most successful operation against SWAPO in its thirty-three year insurgency, and inflicted a blow in personnel and material losses from which SWAPO never fully recovered. In pure military terms, the SADF attacks had been a resounding success – shattering SWAPO's military infrastructure in Angola and delivering a devastating psychological blow to the organisation – but in the political arena the 'Cassinga raid' (as it became known) was a disaster for Pretoria, triggering international outrage. Five days after the attacks SWAPO flew in a team of Western journalists who photographed two mass graves containing a total of 582 men, women and children who had been killed in the attack. Rejecting accusations that it had committed a war crime, the SADF insisted (and continues to insist to this day) that the defenders of 'Moscow' were armed and in uniform, adding that the fighting was so intense that the paratroopers ended up staying in the camp two hours longer than expected, eventually withdrawing with some parts of the camp still

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Tchamutete. Responding to the surprise attack less than ten miles to the camp's north, the Cuban commander launched a counter-attack, advancing down the middle of the main road where his hastily-assembled column proved an easy target for the SAAF Mirages and Buccaneers. The ex-FAR officer compared the disaster to a similar incident during the Bay of Pigs invasion when a bus full of young soldiers was hit by enemy aircraft while travelling down the main road towards Girón, killing all the occupants. According to him, in the aftermath of the attack the FAR set up military commission to investigate how so many Cubans had been killed in one engagement, the outcome of which he didn't know. The bodies of those killed – mostly young men on military service – were buried in Tchamutete, but all were exhumed and returned to Cuba at the end of the war along with all other remains of Cubans killed in Angola (see Chapter 12). Hooper (op. cit., p.118) puts 'Known Cuban losses' at 16 killed & 63 wounded, the suggestion being that many more died in the encounter.

[110] Cuban sources (among them the ex-FAR officer stationed in Otchinjau during the raid) claim that the SADF suffered heavy casualties that day, and that they were forced to leave several bodies and prisoners behind. No evidence has been produced to support these claims, however.

[111] Steenkamp (op. cit., p.77) puts the total SWAPO killed at 1,600, but this figure does not concur with other accounts (such as Hooper, op. cit., p.118 & Rey, op. cit., p.232) which put the figure at 'over 600'.

under SWAPO control. Opponents of the apartheid regime have maintained the exact opposite, however, describing the attack as a "massacre at bayonet-point of unarmed women, children and old people",[113] and the subsequent admission by the South Africans that some of those killed may indeed have been women and children (who they insisted had either got caught in the cross-fire or were uniformed SWAPO members themselves) served only to reinforce this impression. Nevertheless, the failure of any of the 253 paratroopers who survived the attack to speak out against the massacre in over twenty years is puzzling, and tends to support the view that many (though by no means all) of those killed *were* actively involved in defending the camp.[114] Ultimately opinion is still fiercely divided on the 'Cassinga raid', and to this day even South African writers who broadly support the SADF version of events recognise that the whole story has yet to come out.[115]

The international outrage which followed the 'Cassinga raid' was seized on by SWAPO, the MPLA and Cuba which were only too happy to sidestep the more embarrassing question of how the SADF had been able to attack and effectively wipe out two of SWAPO's most important camps with almost complete impunity.[116] Cuban defensive reactions to the attack had been shown to be woefully-inadequate, and the damage done to SWAPO's offensive capability (as well as its reputation) would take years to rebuild. More alarming for the Cuban and MPLA leadership, however, was the realisation that South Africa would no longer tolerate SWAPO and MK operating freely in Angola, and that the SADF was now clearly prepared to launch cross-border raids against their training and transit camps. The prospect of a prolonged cross-border campaign against SWAPO and MK could only have one

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[112] Figures from Hooper (op. cit., p.118).

[113] Ex-FAR officer (in interview) who visited the scene after the attack. Original Spanish reads: "Aquello fue masacre a punto de bayoneta, mujeres, niños y ancianos".

[114] Geldenhuys (op. cit., p.94) notes that "[i]t would have been impossible for 250 men to commit mass atrocities without somebody talking about it out of aversion". Heitman (in interview) insisted that he had seen the SADF photos taken during the attack and that all the bodies were wearing a basic uniform (none had boots, but this is still common in most African armies) and that there were no children among them. He suggests that the carnage among the SWAPO was for the most part caused by the surprise air-strike which caught all the inhabitants of the camp out in the open at the same moment, inflicting severe casualties.

[115] For example Heitman (in interview with author) & Steenkamp (op. cit., p.80).

[116] SWAPO did eventually launch a retaliatory strike, but it did not come until 23 August 1978 when a SWAPO team bombarded the SADF's Katima Mulilo base (in the Caprivi Strip) with 122mm rockets, killing ten SADF/SAP members and wounding ten others.

implication for the Cuban forces stationed in Angola: namely that they could not now withdraw from Angola if their allies there were not to be overwhelmed by the revived South African threat. Fanciful plans for a staged withdrawal were nevertheless drawn up by the Cubans in 1979, but the truth was that the 'Cassinga raid' had exposed the weakness of Angola's defences and its net result was to rule out – at least for the time-being – any reduction in the size of Cuban forces in Angola.[117] What the Cubans did not realise at the time, however, was that the SADF's success at Cassinga would end up drawing South Africa back into the Angolan conflict, and inexorably lead to its second invasion of southern Angola (see 'Operation Protea', below).[118]

## The 'Shaba II' invasion, May-June 1978

Less than a fortnight after the 'Cassinga raid' the world's attention dramatically swung back to southern Zaire where, on 17 May, a force of 6,500 Katangese troops invaded Shaba once more, this time capturing Kolwesi and threatening to take control of the copper-rich province.[119] Several foreign-owned copper mines were severely damaged in the fighting, and then – in a virtual re-run of the previous year's invasion – rapid intervention by a combined French and Belgian military force succeeded in driving the Katangese out of Kolwesi (with considerable bloodshed) and back across the Angolan border by early June. Although quashed just as quickly as the previous year's invasion, Shaba II was to have far more serious repercussions than Shaba I, not only for the Katangese themselves but for all the parties involved in the Angolan war. The timing of the invasion – which made headline news across the world – could not have been worse for Castro as it diverted international attention away from the 'Cassinga raid' and instead focused it on the Cuban regime for allegedly

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[117] According to the 4 February 1982 Joint Declaration (see Chapter 8), a fresh attempt was made in mid-1979 to re-start troop withdrawals, but the launching of Operation Saffron by the SADF in September of that year forced them to call it off, and following the occupation of large tracts of southern Angola by the SADF during Operation Protea (August 1981) all talk of withdrawal was shelved indefinitely.

[118] According to Muatxiânvua (op. cit.), between the South African withdrawal in March 1976 and Operation Protea (August 1981) there were 1,617 SAAF reconnaissance flights over Angola, 100 aerial bombardments, 50 aerial strafing runs, 26 ground reconnaissance incursions, 30 land attacks and nine mine-laying operations.

[119] My account of Shaba II is pieced together from Henriksen, op. cit., p.68, LeoGrande, op. cit., p.27, Mesa Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.144, Helen Kitchen (ed.), Angola, Mozambique and the West, CSIS, New York, 1987, p.23 & Crocker, op. cit., p.54.

masterminding the entire operation. On 25 May Jimmy Carter – whose new administration had offered only a muted reaction to both Shaba I and the massive military intervention in Ethiopia – accused Cuba of direct involvement in the invasion, an allegation the Cuban leader vehemently denied.[120] Not for the first time Castro was discovering the limitations of his influence over the MPLA government which was clearly prepared to pursue its own policy goals irrespective of the damage they did to Castro's regional strategy. Having twice been caught off-guard by the Katangese invasions, Castro would not allow a 'Shaba III', and he admonished Neto to resolve the Katangese issue once and for all.

Katangese motivations for launching the second invasion in May 1978 are still not clear, but it is possible that the incursion of a large FNLA force into the Cazombo salient (Moxico) the previous March goaded the MPLA into action.[121] Determined to step up the pressure on Mobutu to curtail FNLA and FLEC activities in Zaire, it is quite possible that the MPLA government ordered the second Katangese invasion of Shaba, unaware of just how negative a reaction this decision would elicit. Accusations of Cuban involvement appear to be without foundation, however, although rumours continue to circulate in Havana that FAR officers helped plan the invasion and even accompanied the leading Katangese elements into Shaba.[122] Alleged East German involvement in planning the invasion is likewise little more than rumour.[123] What is certain is that combined pressure from Cuba and the USA finally forced Angola and Zaire to the negotiating table, and in July 1978 – scarcely a month after the last Katangese forces had withdrawn into Angola – Neto met Mobutu in Brazzaville to negotiate a deal which would finally resolve this decade-old dispute. In

[120] American suspicions were further fuelled on 22 June when Mobutu claimed to have captured Cuban prisoners in his possession. A subsequent investigation by American officials, however, concluded that Mobutu's claims were false.

[121] Valdés ('Cuba y Angola', op. cit., p.667) notes that from 20 to 24 March the FNLA force had heavy clashes with FAPLA forces, before withdrawing in early April. During the incursion Zaire reportedly placed 20,000 troops, 50 tanks and more than 100 armoured vehicles along the border with Angola as a show of support for the FNLA. This may have been the provocation necessary for the MPLA to give its support to a second Katangese invasion of Shaba.

[122] For example, author's interview with FAR historian, Havana, 8 September 1997.

[123] According to Jiri Valenta (in Mesa Lago & Belkin, op. cit., p.144), "[a]vailable, albeit circumstantial, evidence suggests that the East Germans, concerned about the activities of the West German rocket firm OTRAG (which was developing satellite-launching capabilities in a large area of Shaba), had trained the FLNC and perhaps encouraged it to stage an invasion of the province". No evidence corroborating this allegation has yet surfaced, however.

a simple *quid pro quo* Neto would disarm the Katangese gendarmes as they streamed back into Angola (and then repatriate them) if Mobutu would pull back all FNLA, FLEC and UNITA bases from the Angolan-Zairian border and eventually cut off all military aid to those movements.[124] This time, with both countries under tremendous pressure to make the agreement work, the deal stuck and the Katangese forces were gradually disarmed and repatriated (allegedly with some assistance from Cuban troops) while FNLA, FLEC and UNITA bases along the Angolan-Zairian border were shut down.[125] It was the end of the line for the FNLA, and Roberto would spend a little over a year trying to hold out in Kinshasa before he was finally expelled for good (see below).

## UN Security Council Resolution 435, 29 September 1978

With the FNLA threat to northern Angola now effectively eradicated, the MPLA and Cuban governments then received a further boost to their international strategy when on 29 September 1978 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 435, demanding South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia to be followed by independence and free elections.[126] The passing of the Resolution – no doubt influenced in some part by global revulsion at the carnage of the 'Cassinga raid' – was a major diplomatic victory for SWAPO, not only recognising the independence movement as the genuine representative of the Namibian people, but more significantly giving SWAPO's war against South Africa the international legitimacy it had lacked since its launch in

[124] It is unclear on what date the agreement was signed, but it was probably before 9 July when Neto made a public announcement of the conditions of the agreement (CWIHP website). The MPLA government also agreed to take back tens of thousands of Angolan refugees living across the border in Zaire in exchange for an estimated 250,000 Zairian refugees (most of them Lundas) living in north-eastern Angola.

[125] The fate of the 6,500-man Katangese force is still unclear, but it appears that the majority eventually returned to Zaire. According to James (op. cit., p.218), by 1987 there were still 1,400 former Katangese gendarmes fighting alongside the FAPLA-Cubans against UNITA and South Africa. According to one FAR historian (in interview with author, Havana, September 1997), Mobutu ordered their extermination, and from late 1978 onwards 20-30 of them were killed every day (often by being thrown out of helicopters over the jungle) until by 1980 none of them remained.

[126] Negotiations between South Africa and SWAPO had been underway for some time under the guise of the UN and had seemed hopeful when on 25 April 1978 South Africa formally accepted Western proposals for a settlement, signalling that a negotiated agreement was at least feasible. Three days later, however, the SADF intercepted a column of 100 SWAPO guerrillas infiltrating northern Namibia, giving the SADF hawks the excuse they needed to launch the 'Cassinga raid' – after which SWAPO suspended the negotiations (Steenkamp, op. cit., p.74).

1966.[127] From 1978 onwards Resolution 435 would form the keystone of SWAPO, MPLA and Cuban policy in the region, and all three parties would use every available opportunity to demand the implementation of 'Resolution 435', determined to capitalise on the international advantage they had gained over the South Africans. Unfortunately for SWAPO and the Cubans, however, far from forcing South Africa to withdraw from Namibia, Resolution 435 would quickly become the principal obstacle to that withdrawal, locking all negotiations in an impasse which was to last for nearly a decade.

For the simple truth was that South Africa would never withdraw from Namibia – with or without pressure from the international community – while SWAPO and MK were still operating freely from bases across Angola. In Pretoria's eyes the struggle against these two movements was a struggle for the survival of apartheid, and although there was general consensus in South Africa that Namibia should eventually be granted independence, Pretoria was not prepared to do this if it meant handing over the country to a hostile SWAPO government which would then be able to position its own (and MK) forces right up against South Africa's borders. Indeed the 'Cassinga raid' – which influenced the passing of Resolution 435 – had been launched specifically to counter SWAPO's growing threat to Namibian (and South African) security, and regardless of whether Pretoria was in fact partly responsible for SWAPO and MK's increased presence in southern Angola (having precipitated the Cuban military intervention by launching Operation Savannah), the threat they posed to South African security would have to be addressed if Pretoria were ever to accept any form of withdrawal proposal.[128] Pretoria's opponents – SWAPO, the MPLA and Cuba – saw no reason to compromise, however, and doggedly insisted on the implementation of Resolution 435 as the only acceptable resolution to the Namibia question. It would take a new approach under the American Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker – 'linkage' – to break the logjam, and create a negotiating strategy which (after seven painstaking years) would finally provide the framework for a lasting regional settlement (see Chapters 8-11).

[127] See Appendix 1 for full text of UNSCR 435.
[128] Crocker (op. cit., p.59) later noted that the West "lacked credibility with the South Africans because it failed to take seriously their regional security interests".

## Neto's last year: security deteriorates as the SADF and UNITA step up the war

One month after the passing of Resolution 435, the MPLA authorities imposed a curfew in Huambo and Kuito-Bié – UNITA's core areas of support – finally acknowledging the seriousness of the guerrilla insurgency. Unbowed by seven separate FAPLA-Cuban offensives launched against it since April 1976,[129] UNITA had emerged as a highly-effective guerrilla army, and by late 1978 it was expanding its operations northwards from bases in Cuando Cubango into Moxico and Bié.[130] Simultaneously the SADF was stepping up its own cross-border campaign, on 7 March 1979 launching dual operations – Rekstok and Saffraan – aimed at destroying suspected SWAPO and MK camps located in Angola and Zambia. Although these operations were for the most part inconclusive, the SAAF did succeed in bombing and completely destroying MK's principal training camp at Novo Catengue (Benguela), killing two MK guerrillas and one Cuban officer in the air-strike.[131] With Angola's security situation steadily deteriorating it is rumoured that Neto entered into secret cease-fire talks with Savimbi,[132] determined to end the internal insurgency and incorporate UNITA into the national government before his death. However, these talks (if they did in fact take place) came to nothing for in September 1979 – with his health deteriorating seriously – Neto left Angola for the last time for cancer treatment in the Soviet Union. The Soviet doctors could do little for him, though, as by that

[129] The offensives were in April (Operation Ferro), May (Operation Tigre), August (Operation Kwenha) & November 1976 (Operation Vakulukutu), and April, June & October 1978.
[130] UNITA built its main base, Jamba (Swahili for 'elephant') less than 20 miles north of the border with the Caprivi Strip, and over 350 miles south of the FAPLA's nearest base at Cuito Cuanavale. Being so close to SADF bases in Caprivi (for example, Mapacha) made supplying UNITA easy, and throughout the war dozens of journalists were flown from Johannesburg for lengthy briefings by Savimbi in Jamba. In 1980 UNITA captured Mavinga (250 miles northeast of Jamba) which became UNITA's forward base, and thus the first objective of the mammoth 1985 and 1987 FAPLA offensives against UNITA (see Chapter 9).
[131] The surprisingly light casualties were the result of MK having been warned that an SAAF air-strike was imminent. The Cuban lieutenant who died had apparently gone back to the barracks to fetch some sensitive documents when the attack came (Kasrils, op. cit., pp.186-188). After the attack the MK guerrillas were moved to a temporary camp in an old coffee estate at Pango, but eventually a new training camp was set up in Malanje which by the mid-1980s had become MK's principal training camp in Angola.
[132] For example, see Crocker, op. cit., p.56.

stage his liver and pancreas cancer were far advanced, and on 10 September he died in a Moscow clinic.[133]

News of Neto's death was greeted with an emotional outpouring in Angola, the MPLA Central Committee declaring 45 days of national mourning in his honour.[134] Viewed by many Angolans as their greatest national hero, Neto's premature death was a severe blow not only to the unity of the party he led (which was still shaky after recent radical reform), but also to Angola's long-term prospects for peace. For the loss of his guiding influence as party leader threatened to reopen the damaging factional splits which had plagued the MPLA throughout its history, and moves were immediately made to elect a new leader who had a broad consensus of support across the party. Brushing aside the more controversial contenders – among them die-hard veterans such as Lúcio Lara and Lopo do Nascimento – on 21 September 1979 the MPLA leadership chose the lesser-known José Eduardo dos Santos, at the time only 37 years of age.[135] The decision to elect him leader of the MPLA (and thus President of Angola) was taken because he was – broadly speaking – the consensus choice, and few at the time had any inkling that he would far outlast his predecessor's tenure as leader of the party (and remain President of Angola to this day). Described by Chester Crocker as "perhaps Africa's most frightened Marxist",[136] Dos Santos would prove to be a far more unreliable (and unpredictable) ally for Cuba and the Soviet Union than Neto, and would introduce a new kind of politics into the MPLA,

[133] Nine years later in an interview for Paris Match (Jean Letarguy, 'Jonas Savimbi: Comment j'ai vaincu les russes d'Angola', 18 March 1988, p.142), Savimbi claimed that Neto had attempted a reconciliation with UNITA through the Senegalese president Léopold Senghor, and that to prevent UNITA's incorporation into the Angolan government the Soviet doctors in Moscow were instructed to ensure that Neto did not recover from his cancer. This allegation – though widely repeated in Luanda to this day – is of course unsubstantiated.

[134] Neto was laid in state in Luanda amid great fanfare on 13 September 1979 (his body was preserved like Lenin & Stalin's). Several Cubans who were serving on internationalist missions at the time recalled how much affection Angolans had for Neto and how upset they were at news of his death (author's interviews, Havana, 1999).

[135] Dos Santos was the son of a Luanda brick-layer and had become a member of the MPLA in his teens. He had seen some action during the war against the Portuguese, and later studied in Baku (Soviet Union) from where he obtained a degree in petroleum engineering. After undergoing a military telecommunications course, he joined the 2nd Military Region's telecommunications unit (the van he worked in can still be seen in Luanda's castle) and was elected to the MPLA Central Committee and Politburo in September 1974 (Wolfers & Bergerol, op. cit., p.184). Following independence he held a number of posts in the MPLA government – including Foreign Minister – before rising in prominence after the Alves coup. He was confirmed as President of the MPLA-PT at the First Extraordinary Party Congress in December 1980.

overseeing its transformation from an ostensibly Marxist-Leninist party into the venal cryptocracy it is today.

In an ironic coincidence of events, the eclipse of the MPLA's principal protagonist was followed almost immediately by that of his main rival, Holden Roberto. Having struggled in vain to maintain Mobutu's favour in the wake of the 'Shaba II' invasion, Roberto was finally expelled from Zaire in November 1979 (while he was in Paris receiving medical treatment), effectively ending his direct involvement in the Angolan War.[137] Disaffected FNLA elements nevertheless vowed to fight on under new leadership – forming the FNLA-COMIRA (Comité Militar de Resistência de Angola, 'Angolan Military Resistance Committee') the following August – but they were to prove totally ineffective, and by late 1983 they had ceased to play any part in the Angolan conflict.[138] Roberto's removal from international affairs contrasted sharply with his former colleague and rival, Jonas Savimbi, who the very same month visited Washington DC where he was fêted by the American administration and met (unofficially) with Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig.[139] Although still constrained from any involvement in Angola by the 'Clark Amendment', the American government was nevertheless determined to cultivate its relationship with Savimbi's UNITA, viewing the guerrilla movement as a vital bulwark against Communist expansion in southern Africa. Informal contacts with UNITA would therefore continue throughout the early 1980s until July 1985, when the repeal of the 'Clark Amendment' cleared the way for a full programme of military support (see Chapter 9).

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[136] Crocker, op. cit., p.145.

[137] According to Roberto (in interview), an American diplomat in Kinshasa warned him in September 1979 that Mobutu was planning to expel him from Zaire, but when he confronted Mobutu the Zairian President vehemently denied this. That very same month, however, Roberto claims that Mobutu met in secret with Dos Santos in Zambia (under the guise of Kaunda) and agreed to expel Roberto from Zaire at the earliest opportunity, seizing on his absence from Zaire in October to formalise his expulsion.

[138] The FNLA was allowed to set up an office in Luanda following the May 1991 Peace Accords, and Roberto campaigned in the 1992 elections, failing to make much of an impact nationally. Several FNLA delegates continue to represent Roberto in the Angolan National Assembly, but as a political force the FNLA is now indistinguishable from the many other minority political groups in Angola.

[139] Haig would go on to become US Secretary of State in the Reagan administration, while Kissinger (although no longer in the American government) was still an influential and respected figure.

## The 'Second Cold War' starts, superpowers renew interest in Angola

Renewed American interest in Savimbi was the result of a broader sea-change in international politics between 1979 and 1981 which unleashed what has been called the 'Second Cold War', drawing Angola back into the epicentre of Superpower confrontation. Throughout 1979 a series of revolutions and military coups brought down several Western-backed regimes – most prominently in Iran and Nicaragua – spreading alarm in Washington which feared the inexorable spread of Soviet influence in these areas.[140] When Soviet troops then invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979, the Carter administration was finally goaded into abandoning the increasingly-unworkable policy of détente, and it openly condemned the Soviet invasion, discarding the SALT II Treaty recently signed by both parties.[141] As a new generation of Western leaders emerged – spearheaded by figures such as Margaret Thatcher (elected on 3 May 1979) and Ronald Reagan (sworn in on 20 January 1981) – Western governments adopted a more confrontational approach towards the Soviet bloc, a policy which led them into indirect conflict with it through a variety of proxy wars fought across the globe throughout the 1980s.[142] Already the victim of reckless superpower intervention in the mid-1970s, Angola would once more become the focal point of Superpower confrontation in southern Africa, triggering a military escalation on a scale which dwarfed even the Cuban military intervention of 1975. Gradually the MPLA government and its Cuban allies would lose control of the military conflict in Angola, until by the mid-1980s it had become totally subjugated to Soviet interests

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[140] On 16 January 1979 the Shah of Iran fled his country, and following the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to jubilant crowds, on 1 April the Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed, immediately destabilising the region. In July the American-backed Somoza dictatorship was overthrown by the FSLN ('Sandinistas') whose Marxist-Leninist leanings and close links to Cuba eventually persuaded the CIA to launch a dubious and bloody war against them. And in Africa three particularly brutal dictators – Idi Amin (11 April), Macías Nguema (3 August), and Jean Bédel Bokassa (21 September) – were overthrown by coups or foreign forces.

[141] The USA extended its protests by reneging on wheat export deals agreed with the Soviet Union, and by forbidding its athletes to compete in the 1980 Olympics in Moscow.

[142] In the early 1980s the application of the 'Reagan doctrine' re-ignited the dormant Cold War, the American administration offering covert military assistance to dozens of anti-Communist forces across the world, most notoriously to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan (many of them now members of the repressive Taleban government), the Contras in Nicaragua, the 'Mano Blanco' in El Salvador and (from late 1985) UNITA in Angola. According to Crocker (op. cit., p.290), the Reagan Doctrine greatly raised the price of Soviet military adventurism abroad, and forced Moscow and Havana to accept that "it was one thing to seize power using instruments of coercion: it was something altogether

and – in terms of the running of the war – subject to overall Soviet military control (see Chapter 9).

## South Africa adopts 'Total Onslaught' (February 1980), stepping up war in Angola

The catalyst which unleashed Angola's second round of conflict did not come from outside Africa, however, but from within when in April 1980 Zimbabwe became independent. Since the mid-1960s an intermittent guerrilla war had raged in Southern Rhodesia between the white minority government and African nationalist forces (ZANU and ZAPU), but by late 1979 it had reached a virtual stale-mate. On 5 December of that year all parties agreed to a cease-fire and negotiations brokered by the formal colonial power Britain, and in subsequent elections held in February 1980 Robert Mugabe (leader of ZANU) was elected Zimbabwe's first President. The election of a declared Marxist-Leninist and outspoken opponent of apartheid confirmed Pretoria's worst nightmare scenario, and sent shock waves through the government. For having steadily lost its regional allies in the fight against African nationalism – the Belgian Congo in 1960, Northern Rhodesia in 1964, Portuguese Angola & Mozambique in 1975, and now Southern Rhodesia (see map) – South Africa faced the prospect of fighting alone against a hostile continent, without the support of the West.[143] With its back to the wall Pretoria decided to take desperate measures, and adopted what became known as the 'Total Onslaught' policy. Convinced that the international forces of Communism (and implicitly African nationalism) were ranged in a 'total onslaught' against the apartheid regime, Pretoria determined to strike back against all neighbouring states which harboured anti-apartheid forces, with the explicit aim of destabilising them to such an extent that they would have no choice but to close down the SWAPO and MK bases they harboured.

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different to prop up year after year a collection of feckless and bankrupt regimes that lacked a popular mandate and depended overwhelmingly on Soviet guns to survive".

[143] Lack of support from the West was particularly galling for Pretoria which viewed itself as a lone force fighting to protect Western values against the Communist onslaught. What Pretoria failed to recognise, however, was the generalised revulsion in the West at the political system in South Africa

Almost immediately the SADF stepped up its cross-border campaign against SWAPO and MK bases in Angola, Mozambique and Zambia, just as SWAPO was escalating its own insurgency in Namibia. On 10 June 1980 the SADF launched its largest mechanised infantry operation since the Second World War – 'Operation Sceptic' – against a large SWAPO command-and-control centre at Chifufua (code-named 'Smokeshell', 110 miles north of the Namibian border).[144] During heavy fighting 360 SWAPO guerrillas were killed (versus 17 SADF) and the camp destroyed, but as SADF forces were withdrawing they were attacked by a FAPLA column, the first direct engagement between the SADF and FAPLA since the cross-border campaign began.[145] This was a worrying development for the SADF – which had up to this point waged its war against SWAPO in isolation – and marked the start of a violent series of confrontations between the SADF and FAPLA which would continue sporadically for the next eight years, eventually drawing in the Cuban forces based in southern Angola. The attack on 'Smokeshell' was almost immediately followed on 30 July by Operation Klipkop – a lightning raid by 80 SADF paratroopers on a SWAPO base at Chitado (just over the border near Ruacaná) – but SADF attempts to keep FAPLA troops out of the fighting again do not appear to have worked, and several FAPLA troops were among the 27 defenders killed in the attack.[146] Direct SADF assistance in UNITA's dramatic capture of Mavinga (Cuando Cubango) in September only served to draw South Africa yet deeper into UNITA's conflict with the FAPLA,[147] and following Gen. Magnus Malan's appointment as Minister of Defence on 7 October (and his replacement as Chief of the SADF by Gen. Constand Viljoen) Pretoria began to consider the permanent occupation of parts of southern Angola by the SADF.

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which gave 80% of the land to the white minority whilst effectively disenfranchising the entire indigenous population.

[144] My account of Operation Sceptic is taken from Steenkamp, op. cit., pp.92-93, Geldenhuys, op. cit., pp.120-124 & Horace Campbell, op. cit., p.14. The operation actually began on 25 May when an SADF vanguard force set up a secured area at Mulemba (60 miles north of the border) where they were joined on 9 June by the main force.

[145] Geldenhuys (op. cit., p.124) described the clash between the SADF and FAPLA near Xangongo as "a tough battle".

[146] Before the main assault was launched SAAF bombers dropped 20,000 leaflets on the FAPLA camp warning them not to intervene in the fighting, but these served only to galvanise the FAPLA troops into action.

[147] Campbell (op. cit., p.14) states that the SADF captured Mavinga for UNITA in June 1980 during Operation Sceptic, but he appears to be mistaken.

Talks between Angola, SWAPO and South Africa had been underway at the UN since 1979 on the setting-up of a De-Militarised Zone (DMZ) in southern Angola, but by 1981 these had begun to lose all meaning as UNITA (which was excluded from the talks) had taken control of much of the proposed area under discussion. With SWAPO intensifying its Namibian insurgency (during 1980 over 100 SADF and 1,400 SWAPO guerrillas were killed in numerous clashes, the bloodiest year to date)[148] and the SADF's alliance with UNITA growing ever closer, Pretoria therefore decided to create its own 'buffer zone' in southern Angola which could be placed under joint SADF-UNITA control. Anxious to drive SWAPO back from the border with Namibia (which it could infiltrate at will), plans were drawn up for a full-scale invasion of southern Angola, the first since the traumatic Operation Savannah six years earlier.[149] 'Operation Protea' (named after South Africa's national flower) would involve 4,000-5,000 troops, supported by Centurion tanks, Ratel armoured cars and SAAF Mirage fighters,[150] and was intended not only to destroy SWAPO's military presence along the border but also the FAPLA's which had grown steadily over the previous five years and now posed a direct threat to the SADF's hold over Namibia.[151] Operation Protea's principal objectives would therefore be the capture of Xangongo and N'Giva (where there were large FAPLA-SWAPO concentrations), the destruction of the air-defence installations at Cahama (which the Cubans had helped the FAPLA set up) and the annihilation of whatever SWAPO-FAPLA forces they encountered en route.

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[148] Steenkamp, op. cit., p.95.

[149] Operation Protea was preceded by a series of small-scale SADF operations in mid-1981 aimed at disrupting SWAPO's infrastructure in southern Angola. The largest of these – Operation Carnation – succeeded in killing 225 SWAPO guerrillas and was still underway when Protea was launched (Geldenhuys, op. cit., p.145). According to Muatxiânvua (op. cit.), in July 1981 SADF forces infiltrated southern Angola, occupying Mulemba, Nehone, N'dova, Mupa & Evale in preparation for the main offensive.

[150] Troop numbers from Crocker (op. cit., p.105). Campbell (op. cit., p.14) & Muatxiânvua (op. cit.) claim that the SADF force consisted of 11,000 troops, 36 M-41 Centurion tanks, 70 AML-90 armoured cars, 200 Ratel, Buffel & Saracen armoured personnel carriers, various G-5 (155m) guns & 127mm Kentron ground-to-ground missiles, and 90 aircraft. However, this figure seems absurdly exaggerated given that SADF troop numbers in Angola rarely exceeded 5,000 men throughout the Angolan War.

[151] In particular the SADF were concerned by the construction of a complex radar and air-defence network in Cahama (including Soviet SAM-8 AA-missiles) which threatened to remove the SAAF's air superiority in future operations. As Geldenhuys (op. cit., p.144) recalls, "[t]he sustained delivery of Soviet arms, continued Cuban support and stock-piling of vast quantities of weaponry, and the build-up of FAPLA and PLAN in southern Angola, posed a real threat".

## Operation Protea (August 1981)

Operation Protea began on 23 August 1981 with an SAAF air-strike against FAPLA air defence and radar installations in Cahama and Chilemba, completely destroying them.[152] Simultaneously a mechanized SADF force crossed into Angola and occupied Humbe, cutting off the retreat of any FAPLA-SWAPO forces based in Xangongo and preventing their reinforcement from Cahama. The following day Xangongo was attacked by a second SADF armoured column and captured after a brief fight with the FAPLA-SWAPO garrison there,[153] and the combined SADF force then began an immediate advance on Protea's second objective – N'Giva – brushing aside a FAPLA tank and artillery holding position at Môngua. The FAPLA-SWAPO defenders of N'Giva – advised by several senior Soviet officers and probably some Cubans too – were better prepared however and put up a brave defence, fighting off three SADF assaults on 27 August before being forced to abandon the town the following day after their artillery was destroyed.[154] SADF columns then continued to advance northwest towards Cahama itself but eventually ran into heavy defences 12 miles south of the town and withdrew to Uia, digging in there.[155] By the end of August the SADF had captured 15,000 square miles of Angolan territory, stretching from Uia and Mucope (northwest of Xangongo) to Evale and Mupa (northeast of N'Giva), and had seized or destroyed over 3,000 tons of Soviet weaponry, armour and supplies (much of which was handed over to UNITA).[156] Over 1,000 casualties had been inflicted on the FAPLA-SWAPO forces (for a loss of 10 SADF killed and several dozen wounded), and before withdrawing the SADF left two semi-permanent garrisons behind at

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[152] My account of Operation Protea is taken from Geldenhuys, op. cit., pp.144-145, Steenkamp, op. cit., pp.98-99, Campbell, op. cit., pp.14-15 & Muatxiânvua, op. cit..

[153] According to Muatxiânvua (op. cit.), the SADF destroyed the enormous bridge over the Cunene river at Xangongo to prevent reinforcements from Cahama reaching N'Giva. If this is the case, then it is likely that the bridge was destroyed once the offensive was complete (after 5 September) and not when the SADF captured Xangongo (24 August).

[154] Muatxiânvua (op. cit.) notes that – as during Operation Klipkop – leaflets were dropped by the SAAF before the main assault warning the FAPLA not to get involved, but they were as before ineffective.

[155] According to Campbell (op. cit.), another attempt to capture Cahama was made by a force of helicopter-borne SADF troops in late September, but it was also unsuccessful. SADF sources, however, make no reference to this attack.

[156] Weaponry and supplies seized included ammunition, tanks, armoured cars, anti-tank guns, AA-guns & nearly 200 logistics vehicles (Geldenhuys, op. cit., p.146).

Xangongo and N'Giva, effectively enforcing the SADF's military occupation of southern Cunene.

**Cuban reaction to Operation Protea**

The Cuban reaction to the South African invasion was uncharacteristically muted and, aside from predictable diplomatic protests at the UN and OAS, no military action was taken by Cuban troops against the invading forces. Despite the fact that MMCA had over 10,000 troops dug in along the ATS Defence Line, these forces remained firmly in their positions while the FAPLA-SWAPO garrisons in Xangongo and N'Giva were wiped out. Possibly the Cuban commanders ruled out an immediate counter-attack out of fear that Lubango (right in the middle of the Cuban position) might turn out to be one of Operation Protea's main objectives, but once the South Africans stopped short of Cahama it is puzzling that Cuban forces made no effort whatsoever to dislodge the SADF garrisons from Xangongo or N'Giva. After all, Cuban troops were stationed in Angola for the specific (and oft-stated) purpose of repelling foreign aggression against Angola, and Operation Protea was clearly a blatant violation of Angola's territorial integrity. In November 1975 the presence of South African troops in Angola had been sufficient grounds for Castro to launch the largest overseas military intervention in Cuba's history, yet only six years later – with thousands of Cuban troops less than 150 miles from the main fighting – the Cuban commanders chose to avoid all contact with the invaders, and simply sat back while the SADF inflicted a punishing defeat on Cuba's allies.

Clearly something fundamental had changed in the Cuban government's approach towards its Angolan operation, and the reckless adventurism of Operation Carlota had given way to a more retrenched, defensive strategy. The root of this change appears to have been in Cuba itself where the government was still recovering from the worst domestic crisis in the Revolution's twenty-one years – the Mariel boatlift (see Appendix 2 for full study). Following the panicked departure of nearly 125,000 Cubans from the western port of Mariel to Florida and a powerful counter-offensive of propaganda inside Cuba itself, domestic support for the Cuban Revolution had

been severely shaken, and a great deal of effort was made by the Cuban government to improve basic living conditions in Cuba, including some modest economic liberalisation. When South African troops entered Angola less than a year after the end of the boatlift, therefore, it appears that the Cuban government was unwilling (or unable) to escalate its military operations in Angola for fear of the domestic repercussions, and it therefore held back from committing Cuban troops to the fighting in southern Cunene.

**The end of Cuban plans to withdraw from Angola**

The net result of this unwillingness to engage the SADF directly, however, was to hand South Africa a permanent foothold in southern Angola from which it could operate against SWAPO, MK, and even Cuban bases with far greater ease and mobility. The FAPLA-SWAPO forces in southern Angola had been decidedly outclassed by the Pretoria war machine, and although they had succeeded in holding onto Cahama they were clearly in no position to mount a successful counter-attack against the two SADF garrisons now based in Cunene. Both the FAPLA and SWAPO would require significant re-training and re-equipping before they could even contemplate such a move, and in the meantime the defence of southern Angola would depend entirely on the Cuban-manned ATS Defence Line. The SADF's capture of Xangongo and N'Giva thus effectively made the ATS the front-line in the Angolan war, and this simple fact ruled out any talk of a Cuban military withdrawal for the foreseeable future.[157] Very quickly the commanders of MMCA would come to realise that there were no circumstances under which they could withdraw their forces from Angola without the immediate collapse of the MPLA regime, and within five months of Operation Protea Cuba would commit itself to sending a further 7,000 troops to bolster the Cuban military contingent as part of a new Soviet-instigated reinforcement programme (see Chapter 8). The launch of Operation Protea – and the FAR's unwillingness to launch a counter-offensive against the South Africans – thus converted the Cuban military forces stationed in Angola into a permanent army of occupation, and over the next four years the Cuban High Command would struggle in

vain to prevent its troops getting sucked into the fighting as Angola turned quite inexorably into Cuba's Vietnam.

[157] On 8 October 1982 Cuba's Ambassador to the UN, Isidoro Malmierca, finally declared the formal suspension of the Cuban withdrawal, citing South African aggression as the principal cause.

# Chapter 7

## 'The People's War'

## Cuban Internationalists in Angola (1975-1991)

Since the Cuban Revolution began in January 1959, the Cuban people have undergone many chaotic and traumatic experiences as their government has lurched from one radical phase to the next, but few have affected as many Cubans quite so directly as the sixteen-year military intervention in Angola. Between 1975 and 1991 over 400,000 Cubans served on internationalist missions in Angola, either in the military forces or as part of the civilian programme which involved thousands of doctors, teachers, construction workers and technicians.[1] For a generation of Cubans internationalist service in Angola represented the highest ideal of the Cuban Revolution, and by the end of the 1980s Angola would have become (in García Márquez's phrase) a 'people's war',[2] eventually involving as much as 5% of the Cuban population.[3] With the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola constantly being postponed (and eventually abandoned), the FAR increasingly drew on Cuba's civilian population for manpower, and as the humanitarian programme expanded in tandem, a vast and surprisingly efficient logistical operation evolved in Cuba, processing the tens of thousands of internationalists who were posted to Angola every year. By the mid-1980s Angola would have become the standard 'tour of duty' for the youth of Cuba, resurrecting (and once more remoulding) Che Guevara's particular model of 'Cuban internationalism' which had been abandoned with such haste in the late 1960s, and radicalising a new generation of Cubans who had grown up under the Revolutionary government. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the

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[1] In a speech given in Havana to returning internationalists on 27 May 1991, Raúl Castro declared that 377,033 Cuban troops had served in Angola, in addition to 'almost 50,000' civilians who served as doctors, teachers and technical workers (see http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro 1991 19910527 for full text). If anything, these figures are an underestimate.

[2] García Márquez (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.50) originally used the phrase when declaring Operation Carlota "not a simple expedition by professional soldiers, but a genuine people's war".

[3] The Cuban population is around 11 million, and if one adds the thousands of Cubans who worked on the Angolan operation in Cuba itself – in logistics, transport & administration – to the c.450,000 who served there (both military and civilian), it is fair to assume that around 5% of the Cuban population was involved in some way in the Angolan operation. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that one would be hard pressed to find a single Cuban whose father, brother, friend or neighbour had not served in Angola at some stage during the period 1975-1991.

human side of the war, and in particular the experience of Cubans – the vast majority of them ordinary civilians – who served in Angola and who have been given no opportunity to voice their thoughts, feelings and frustrations since the withdrawal in May 1991.[4]

## Expanding the military-civilian operation in Angola

Although the internationalist mission in Angola was by no means Cuba's first overseas intervention – there had been at least half a dozen before November 1975 – it dwarfed all previous commitments and immediately placed enormous strain on the FAR's manpower.[5] Before 1975 the FAR sought volunteers for its internationalist missions exclusively from its professional ranks – overwhelmingly favouring MININT special forces or FAR artillery officers whose skills were of most use to the guerrillas they were training – and given the relatively small size of the Cuban contingents involved these missions were unsurprisingly heavily oversubscribed. With the launch of Operation Carlota in November 1975, however, the FAR was forced to call up thousands of Cuban civilians from the national reserve to form the bulk of the reinforcements sent to Angola, and with constant extensions to the mission's deadline it was only a matter of time before this expanded to include Cuban conscripts on national military service.[6] The FAR quickly discovered that young servicemen just out of school were preferable to reservists who tended to have family dependents in Cuba and were often costly to replace in their workplace, and by the

[4] The majority of this chapter is based on interviews carried out by the author with Cuban internationalist veterans during research trips to Cuba in 1997, 1999 and 2000.

[5] The most prominent of the previous operations were Algeria (October 1963), Congo, (1965), Congo-Brazzaville (1965-67), Guiné (1966-74), Venezuela (1967) & Syria (October 1973).

[6] Since 1964 all Cuban males are obliged to carry out three years national military service (called the 'Servicio Militar General') once they turn 18, during which time they receive basic military training and some specialised skills. Once they have completed their three years they remain on their regiment's books as part of the official reserve until the age of 45 or 50, undergoing a two-week refresher course every other year (the length and frequency of this refresher course varies enormously). Thus a full FAR unit may have up to 2,000 men on its books, but only around 800 of these are actually active while the remainder form part of the 'reserve' and carry out ordinary civilian jobs until they are called up. During Operation Carlota volunteer units were made up of men from the front-line reserve, all of them males between 17 and 25 and former members of the FAR, whereas by 1980 the majority of the garrisoning troops were national servicemen. Elite units of the FAR tend to have a much lower retirement age, whereas the national militia's upper age limit can be as high as 60 (this is because the militia is considered a last line of defence in the event of an American invasion) (author's interview

early 1980s national servicemen formed the vast majority of the soldiers serving in Angola.[7] Thus very quickly ordinary Cuban civilians were drawn into the Cuban mission in Angola, and within two years of its launch MMCA had evolved from a 480-man, secret training mission manned exclusively by elite FAR officers into a mammoth occupying military force made up for the most part by Cuban civilians on national service (although overall command of the operation remained within the professional ranks of the FAR and ultimately with Fidel & Raúl Castro themselves).

The vast majority of Cubans who served in Angola in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s were part of a new generation of Cubans born after the fall of Batista (January 1959), the majority of them keen for adventure and anxious to prove themselves to the Revolutionary regime. Most of those who were selected for service in Angola had spent their youth enduring endless commemorations of the heroic deeds of their fathers in the Revolutionary War (1956-59), and many of them saw in the offer of an internationalist mission to Angola an opportunity to prove their own revolutionary credentials. The Cuban regime – which at first fought to curtail the operation in Angola – quickly discovered that service in Angola was the ideal vehicle for politicising this new generation of Cuban revolutionaries, and by the early 1980s internationalist service abroad (principally in Angola) had become part of a broader political programme aimed at Cuban youth which included voluntary work (such as cane-cutting), political rallies and CDR meetings.[8] The Cuban regime was keen to channel the vitality of this younger generation into activities which would radicalise them and ensure their future support for the regime, and following Operation Carlota the state propaganda machine launched a highly-effective campaign to promote the ideals of internationalism, not only giving the ideology a sense of historical mission (loftily declaring it part of the 'struggle against world imperialism') but also

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with Lieut.-Col. Montpier, President of the Municipal Association of Ex-Combatants, Víbora Parque Municipality (northern Havana), 2 October 1997).

[7] Reservists accounted for 70% of the troops sent to Angola in the period 1975-76 (Domínguez, To make a world safe for revolution, op. cit., p.275), and although no figures are currently available for the breakdown subsequent to this date, all veterans interviewed (and, for example, Lieut.-Col. Montpier) have confirmed that by the early 1980s as many as 90% of the front-line Cuban troops were national servicemen.

[8] Jorge Risquet emphasised this point in a speech to the civilian internationalists in Sumbe on 21 May 1984, stating that "our internationalist deeds [in Angola] also strengthen our own people's readiness [in Cuba] for combat and for victory" (author's translation from Concepción, op. cit., p.198).

emphasising the historical and cultural ties linking Cuba and Angola which they claimed made Cuban support for the MPLA inevitable (see below).[9] It was only once the mission in Angola began to drag on indefinitely into the mid-1980s that Cuban youth would start to lose its enthusiasm for internationalism, forcing the regime to turn to material incentives to encourage volunteers (see below).

The Cuban government also had other less ideological motivations for maintaining a contingent of 5,000 skilled workers and (by 1988) over 65,000 troops in Angola, however, as by the late 1970s the Cuban economy was experiencing the dual effects of long-term over-employment and the coming of age of the 'Baby Boom' generation. In 1959 the Cuban Revolution had suffered the same catastrophic exodus of skilled talent as Angola did sixteen years later, but thanks to an ambitious technical training programme by the early 1970s Cuba had produced a surplus of qualified doctors, teachers and engineers for whom it was doubtful there would be enough available postings. Most government institutions and businesses were chronically overstaffed (they remain so to this day), and it is no surprise that both were able to send several of their most experienced workers to Angola – often for years at a time – without absolutely no effect on their office's or company's productivity (if such a concept as productivity can be applied to the Cuban economy).[10] The ever-increasing demand for troops for each of the burgeoning Cuban missions in Africa (Angola and Ethiopia principal among them) led to a rapid expansion in the size of the Cuban armed forces, and this was to prove ideal for absorbing the thousands of young 'babyboomers' who were leaving school and about to enter the job market. Thus the dramatic expansion in Cuba's internationalist programmes can in part be explained by a need to find an outlet not only for thousands of skilled workers the Revolution had created, but also

[9] See Chapter 1 for a full discussion of the origins and ideological framework of Cuban internationalism.

[10] One internationalist veteran – an engineer – who I interviewed (Havana, 31 August 1997) complained that there are far too many engineers and technicians in Cuba (there are four engineers in his family alone) and never enough work to occupy them. Due to the Cuban government's policy of ensuring that everyone has a job, his workforce was always overstaffed ('las plantillas son exageradas') and he admitted that several engineers were sent abroad without their absence being felt (other than socially, of course). It is thus ironic that Fidel Castro should have promised in December 1988 that all returning internationalists would have jobs in Cuba, boasting that "jobs are what we have a surplus of here; plans are what we have a surplus of here" (speech given on 5 December 1988, in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.114), when the chronic overstaffing in Cuba was one of the very reasons internationalist service abroad had been so energetically promoted by the Cuban government.

for the new restless generation of Cubans who had grown up under the Revolution and were full of expectations for their future.

**The rebirth & remoulding of 'Cuban internationalism'**

The dramatic expansion in the Cuban civilian population's involvement in the Angolan operation called for a radical overhaul of the Revolutionary government's ideology, and shortly after the launch of Operation Carlota Che Guevara's model of internationalism was resurrected and re-moulded to fit the Communist government's new agenda.[11] Anxious to recapture the youthful idealism which had motivated Cuba's first generation of revolutionaries during the 1960s – many of whom served on Cuba's first internationalist missions in Latin America and Africa – a massive propaganda drive was launched to highlight the historical precedents of internationalism in Cuban history, much of it of dubious validity.[12] Conscious of the average Cuban's strong sense of patriotism, internationalism was also declared "a sentiment that is higher than the sentiment of patriotism", while fighting for the freedom of Angola was to be viewed as "more noble than fighting for the independence of one's own land".[13] Most spuriously of all, however, the Cuban government went out of its way to emphasise the supposed ethnic ties between the Cuban and Angolan nations – the result of Havana's previous status as the principal entrepôt for the one million African slaves who were exported to the Americas

[11] Probably as a result of the successful military operation in Angola, the new Cuban Constitution (which was ratified by referendum in February 1976) states under the heading 'Political, social and economic foundations of the State' that "Cuba adopts as its own the principles of Proletarian Internationalism and of spirited solidarity with the peoples of the world" (author's translation).

[12] Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares (op. cit., p.153) claim that an unbroken line of internationalist heroes can be drawn through Cuban history from Martí though Antonio Maceo, Máximo Gómez, Balino, Mella, Villena, Pablo de la Torriente Brau, Abel Santamaría, and Camilo Cienfuegos to Che Guevara himself. García Márquez (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.44) similarly claims that: "The spirit of internationalism is a traditional quality of the Cubans. Although the revolution strengthened and defined it in accordance with the principles of Marxism, the essence of this spirit was already well established in the actions and writings of José Martí". Even Fidel Castro attempted to dig up historical precedents, comparing the exploits of Cuban troops fighting in the Tongo Hills (Cuanza Sul) in January 1976 with those of previous black heroes in Cuba's Independence Wars such as Maceo, Crombet and Guillermón Moncada. All of the above, however, conveniently sidestep the issue that this 'internationalism' was exclusively Caribbean-based, that there were often huge gaps spanning decades between the supposed protagonists, and that – perhaps most importantly of all – Guevara's model of internationalism was abandoned in its entirety as a national ideology in the period 1968-75 when the political climate was unfavourable.

between the 16th and 19th centuries – which it claimed made Cuban support for the MPLA an historical inevitability. Exhaustive research even managed to unearth an Angolan slave – Aquilino Amézaga from Soyo (Zaire province) – who had escaped from his plantation in Sancti Spíritus (central Cuba) and joined Serafín Sánchez's troops who were fighting against the Spanish, by the end of the Independence War rising to the rank of Captain.[14] Indeed Castro went out of his way when speaking about the Cuban operation in Angola to emphasise the mixed race of the vast majority of Cubans serving with their ethnic 'primos' (cousins), the Angolans.[15]

What exponents of the Cuban regime's propaganda have consistently failed to notice,[16] however, is that almost all the African slaves exported to Cuba actually came from West Africa – in particular from Senegal, Guinea, Ghana and Nigeria[17] – hence the dominance of Yoruba-based culture in Cuba's Afro-Cuban religions.[18] Had the Cuban government been genuinely motivated by a desire to 'repay the historical debt' (as has often been claimed),[19] then Cuban troops would surely have intervened in Nigeria's Biafra War (1967-1970) to support their Yoruba brothers, rather than concentrate their efforts on the PAIGC in Guiné. By the same token, if there were indeed indelible historical and ethnic ties between Angola and Cuba, then Havana's

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[13] Risquet recounting his speech to returning internationalists in January 1989, in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.26.

[14] Concepción, op. cit., p.115.

[15] Speaking at the NAM ministerial meeting in May 1988, Castro referred to the defenders of Cuito Cuanavale as "blacks and mulattos – I call all Cubans mulattos – from Angola and the Caribbean" (quoted in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.vii).

[16] See for examples Risquet (in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.13), García Márquez (op. cit., p.53), Castro's speech on 26 July 1976 (op. cit., pp.76-84) & author's interview with Lieut.-Col. Montpier, President of the Asociación de Combatientes del Municipio, October 1997, Central del PCC, Víbora Parque (Havana).

[17] Burness (op. cit., p.22) notes that the African slaves exported to Cuba came from the following ethnic groups: the Diola (Senegal), the Mandinga & Bambara (Mali), the Ashanti, Ewe & Fon (Ghana), the Calabri, Ibo & Ijaw (eastern Nigeria) and the Wolof (Senegambia). He also notes that one third of all slaves exported to Cuba in the peak years after 1850 came from Yorubaland.

[18] The most dominant Afro-Cuban religion in Cuba – santería – is predominantly based on Yoruba traditions (i.e from around the Niger river area), and although the second largest – palo monte – draws its inspiration from Bantu culture, the only direct link to Angola is through a minor black magic sect (the 'Cabinderos') originally from the Cabinda area. Cabinda has a distinct ethnic population from the rest of Angola, however, and there are is no direct link between Afro-Cuban culture and the main ethnic groups in Angola.

[19] Speaking in July 1978 at ceremony to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Moncada assault, Fidel Castro declared that: "Internationalism is the most beautiful essence of Marxist-Leninism and its ideas of solidarity and fraternity between peoples. Without internationalism the Cuban Revolution wouldn't even exist. To be an internationalist is to pay our debt to humanity" (author's translation).

lack of support for the MPLA in its most desperate hours – whether in 1961, 1972 or even 1974 – would suggest that these were clearly not the principal motivating factors for Cuban internationalist support. The blunt truth – of which those in the highest echelons of the Cuban leadership were only too aware – was that Cuba's decision to intervene in Angola had been a purely politico-military one, and that it was only once it became clear that Cuban forces would not be able to withdraw from Angola that the Cuban government turned to its civilian population for manpower. Of course this does not mean that the vast majority of those who served in Angola did not passionately believe in the supposed historical, ethnic and cultural ties between the Cuban and Angolan peoples – indeed many still do to this day. But there is little escaping the conclusion that these 'ties' were simply part of a sustained propaganda campaign which proved highly effective at manipulating Cuba's youth, the historical vacuity of which has been confirmed by the complete disappearance of Angola from the Cuban political agenda in the decade since Cuba completed its withdrawal.

**Personal motivations for serving in Angola**

Aside from a strong ideological belief in the justness of their cause, the more than four hundred thousand Cubans who accepted internationalist missions in Angola were also motivated by a variety of selfless and selfish reasons, some of which often went hand-in-hand.[20] The vast majority of young Cubans were keen to emulate the idealised image of Che Guevara which they had been raised with, and many hoped to live up to (or even outdo) the feats of their fathers in the Cuban Revolution twenty years before, although it is also likely that the prospect of travel and adventure in darkest Africa was a major motivating factor. Some had more mundane motivations for going, however. Nearly all the younger veterans told me that they agreed to go to Angola at least in part out of curiosity – to see what Africa was really like and to confirm whether all the terrible stories they had heard about cannibals, man-eating snakes and zombies were actually true.[21] Several admitted that they had agreed to

[20] This section is based on the replies given by the two dozen internationalist veterans I interviewed on why they wanted to go to Angola.

[21] One internationalist (Galo Antonio Carvajal García, op. cit., p.16) noted that he was unable to sleep his first night in Cabinda after the tales he heard on the way over about snakes attacking at night.

serve on an internationalist mission in Angola as a way of reducing their national service by one year (average internationalist missions in Angola lasted two years whereas national service in Cuba was a minimum of three years), and many saw the opportunity to travel to Angola as a way of escaping the boredom of life in Cuba – or in some cases family problems.[22] Nevertheless – except in the rarest of cases[23] – all those who served in Angola were motivated by strong ideological beliefs, even if now when they look back some feel they were rather young and impressionable at the time.

## Selection procedure for internationalist military service in Angola

The call-up procedure for both reservists and national servicemen was similar to that used in November 1975, although the FAR was keen to avoid the chaotic scenes which had accompanied the emergency call-up for Operation Carlota, with thousands of reservists fighting to get a place on the ships bound for Angola.[24] The call-up and selection of internationalist volunteers was dealt with entirely by the local Military Committees ('Comités Militares'), one of which was in every town municipality. Each time the FAR High Command needed a new unit to be sent to Angola the Provincial Army Staff (Estado Mayor del Ejército de la Provincia) would contact the Military Committees under its jurisdiction and request a certain percentage of men from each municipality, leaving the selection procedure to the Committees themselves.[25] Both Cubans on the reserve list and those eligible for military service

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Several veterans told me that they were disappointed on arriving in Angola to find that the biggest natural danger came not from lions or elephants but from the mosquito.

[22] One veteran told me that he viewed the chance of going to Angola as the only way to save his life as he was at the time heavily involved with a bad drug crowd in Havana, and his family were prepared to take any measures to break him out of it. In the end, however, he ended up serving in the Special Forces in Angola and was psychologically scarred by the experience.

[23] García Márquez (op. cit., p.50) notes that at least one volunteer for Operation Carlota had no other motive other than to defect once he arrived in Angola, and he later hijacked a Portuguese flight to Lisbon where he applied for asylum.

[24] Castro later claimed (in interview with Gianni Miná, op. cit., p.206) that when an official enquiry was made into how many Cubans of combat age were prepared to go to Angola, 300,000 had volunteered.

[25] The selection of the professional officers for these units – including commanding officers, pilots and weapons specialists – was carried out separately by the FAR which drew the men directly from its own ranks. Ideologically-suitable officers were summoned to a meeting of their military committee which asked them if they wanted to serve on an internationalist mission abroad. Nearly all accepted as it was not only a great honour to be nominated (postings were eagerly sought throughout the war) but service

would be called to their local Military Committee for an interview by a panel of up to a dozen officers and doctors, and after a medical examination would be asked the same carefully-worded question: "Are you prepared to carry out an internationalist mission abroad?" The country would never be specified (volunteers usually learnt where they were going only days beforehand) and they were told only that the mission would last a minimum of eighteen months, although this might be extended by a further six months.[26] During this time their salary would be paid to their families (reservists were guaranteed their jobs back when they returned), and they would receive room and board in Angola plus a small stipend which varied according to rank.[27] Service on internationalist missions was strictly voluntary, and should a candidate chose to decline his decision was – at least in theory – without prejudice, allowing him to return to his civilian job or carry out his military service in Cuba itself.

In practice, however, the voluntariness of the decision was not quite as clear-cut as the Cuban regime has sought to depict it, and remains deeply controversial. For the Cuban government it was essential that all internationalists went to Angola voluntarily, not only to refute accusations that the regime was using its citizens as unwilling pawns in its international adventures, but more importantly to prevent a 'Vietnam scenario' developing, with mass protests against conscription and draft-dodging. All Cubans were therefore methodically asked if they were prepared to volunteer for the mission, and no internationalist left Cuba for service abroad without first signing a form freely declaring his or her voluntary participation in the mission. Every veteran I have interviewed in Cuba has stated quite explicitly that they went to Angola voluntarily (those who initially refused were given several opportunities during the interview to change their mind), but several admitted that in the circumstances they felt they had little choice but to accept for fear of the

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in Angola offered the prospect of faster promotion than if serving in Cuba itself. Many senior-ranking FAR officers greatly advanced their career by service in Angola, among them 'Furry', 'Polo', Moracén and Espinosa. It was also, however, the undoing of others such as Raúl Díaz-Argüelles (posthumously rehabilitated) and Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez (who was executed for corruption in July 1989).

[26] During the latter stages of the war it was not uncommon for internationalist missions to last up to 32 months, a change which caused some resentment among the soldiers serving in Angola (author's interview with veteran, Havana, September 1999).

[27] See 'Salaries & Stipends' section below for full details.

repercussions if they should refuse.[28] At the time it was generally feared that if you refused to serve on an internationalist mission you would be assigned to the worst units in Cuba for your national service, usually in the remotest parts of Cuba (such as Oriente or Pinar del Río), and many feared – rightly or wrongly – that a refusal might prejudice their chances of getting a place at university or their future career (both of which were strictly controlled by the Cuban government).[29] Several veterans noted that those who refused were criticised and ridiculed by society, and this might explain why very few Cubans turned down the offer of an internationalist mission.[30] Ultimately the evidence is still contradictory, and until further research is done one can only conclude that all Cuban internationalists went to Angola voluntarily, though some may have made the decision under significant psychological coercion.[31]

## Anomalies in the selection procedure

Several other anomalies in the selection procedure stand out, however, the most remarkable of which is the small proportion of habaneros (Cubans from Havana) who served in Angola. Despite the fact that Havana's 2.2 million inhabitants represent at least 20% of the Cuban population, Cuban veterans have consistently noted that fewer than 1% of those sent to Angola were from Havana.[32] The reason for this disparity is not immediately clear – indeed the Cuban government has never officially acknowledged or even commented on it – but on close examination of Havana's role

[28] During my visits to Cuba between 1997 and 2000 I interviewed two dozen veterans, all of whom insisted they had gone voluntarily to Angola. Three nevertheless admitted that they felt under intense pressure to accept and were afraid to say no.

[29] From interviews with veterans, Havana, September 1997 & September 1999.

[30] Lieut.-Col. Montpier (in interview) noted that refusal to serve on an internationalist mission was looked on as being 'very low' ('muy ínfima'). García Márquez (op. cit., p.50) notes that several Cubans who were called up for Operation Carlota and refused to go "were exposed to all kinds of public scorn and private contempt".

[31] Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares (op. cit., p.70) quote an article published in Newsweek (26 January 1976) which suggests significant coercion in the selection procedure: "[The volunteers] are recruited in heavy-handed fashion. At one recent meeting, fifteen out of 60 men declined to step forward. Fourteen of them were excused when they explained that they had family problems – or were afraid. But one, a Communist Party member, was taken aside and apparently relieved of his party card for failing to show the proper revolutionary spirit".

[32] For example, Salvador (in interview with author, Havana, September 1997) noted that when he sailed for Angola in June 1988 on the Soviet ship Fedo Chaliapin only eight of the 1,100 men on board were from Havana (less than 1%). Similarly Héctor (in interview with author, Havana, September 1999) noted that only four of the 450-man contingent he travelled with to Angola was from Havana (again just under 1%).

in the Cuban Revolution it would appear to be ideological. Historically Havana has always been the city most opposed to the ideals of the Revolution in Cuba – having been the centre of the entertainment industry, the various corrupt dictatorships (backed by the mafia) and Cuba's entire middle class – and this is reflected to this day by the disproportionately high level of policing there compared to the provinces.[33] When seeking volunteers for internationalist missions in Angola, therefore, it appears that the Cuban government chose to draw on its core regions of support – in particular Oriente (where Fidel Castro was born and where he built up the Revolutionary Army) and other poorer parts of Cuba which have experienced a notable (if slight) improvement in their living standards since Castro came to power – and took only a handful from Havana, perhaps anxious to avoid exacerbating social tensions in the city.[34]

Even more thorny an issue is whether black Cubans were sent in disproportionately large numbers to fight in Angola while 'white' Cubans avoided the worst of the fighting, an unsubstantiated accusation which has been made by several veterans and foreign opponents of the Revolutionary regime. This highly-contentious issue will probably never be resolved as the very question of race and colour in Cuba is itself extremely emotional and overwrought, many Cubans staunchly refusing to be classified as 'mulattos' or 'negros' despite their actual ethnic origin.[35] The Cuban

[33] Havana has at least five police forces operating on the streets: the Policía Nacional Revolucionaria (National Revolutionary Police) which includes the Policía de Tránsito (Traffic Police), the Departamento Técnico de Investigación (Technical Investigation Department), the Brigadas Especiales de la Policía (the 'green beret' anti-riot police), the SEPSA (Servicio de Protección, or security guards) & the Tropas Especiales del MININT (MININT Special Forces, dressed in black with a wasp emblem on their arm). In addition the Departamento de Seguridad del Estado (Department of State Security, or 'G-2') – Cuba's secret police – has many officers (dressed in green) who patrol the city centre, and there are also the Tropas de Guardia Frontera (Frontier Guards) and the Servicio de Aduana (Customs Service). With so many different police forces in Havana, it is not uncommon to see policemen on every street corner in the city centre. Social tensions in Havana are frequently at boiling-point, and it is no coincidence that the first riot in the Cuban Revolution's history (in August 1994) took place on Havana's sea-front boulevard, the Malecón. In the centre of a sizeable town like Santa Clara (population 175,000), however, a police presence is almost nowhere to be found.

[34] Most habaneros refer disparagingly to Cubans from Oriente as 'palestinos' ('Palestinians', referring to their economic refugee status in Havana where many have come illegally to escape the poverty of the countryside), and suggest that they were more easily manipulated by the regime which as a result sent them to Angola in disproportionately high numbers. Aside from the distasteful racial slur, there is no doubt that provincial support for Fidel Castro's regime is far stronger than in Havana, and it is quite possible that this was a major factor in the selection procedure.

[35] The most recent census in Cuba – conducted in 1993 – defined 66% of the Cuban population as 'white', 12% as 'black', and 22% as 'mulatto'. In reality, however, the proportion of mulattos is

government is particularly sensitive to accusations of racism as it has often sought to depict its regime as a champion of racial rights, but its case is undermined somewhat by the fact that in the 1960s and early 1970s nearly all the Cubans sent on internationalist missions to Africa were black, a policy ostensibly adopted in the belief that black Cubans would blend more easily with the local population and would attract less attention when travelling to and from Africa. Ironically, many black Cubans in the FAR may have looked on Angola as a genuine opportunity to gain the sort of rapid promotion otherwise denied to them in Cuba itself, and certainly by the end of the war several black officers – most notably Brig.-Generals Rolando Kindelán Bles, Víctor Schueg Colás, Rafael Moracén Limonta & Harry Villegas Tamayo 'Pombo' – had achieved top ranks in the FAR thanks to internationalist service abroad.[36] In the final analysis, however, until verifiable data on the ethnic make-up of the internationalist brigades comes to light (which is extremely unlikely), no useful conclusions can be drawn on this issue.

Equally contentious a question is whether – as subsequent defectors from the regime have claimed – senior members of the FAR and PCC used their influence to control where they or their family and friends were posted in Angola, and what role they were assigned to carry out there. Fidel Castro's most outspoken critic – Brig-Gen. Rafael del Pino Díaz who defected to the USA in May 1987 (see Chapter 9) – claimed that "the sons of members of the Politburo [and] the sons of the principal leaders of the government not only do not go to Angola, but they do not even do their military service". He also went on to claim that even if they are eventually posted to Angola it "will be arranged for [them] to stay in Luanda or Lubango to do [their] service, where the worst that can happen to [them] is to get bitten by a mosquito carrying malaria".[37]

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probably much higher, as since 1959 the Cuban population has grown markedly darker with the flight of much of the 'white' community to Miami which is 98% 'white' (figures from Christopher P Baker, Cuba Handbook (1st Ed.), Moon Publications Inc, Chico (CA), 1997, p.90).

[36] The top ranks of the FAR are still white dominated, however, as is evidenced by the interviews carried out by Luis Báez for his book Secretos de Generales (op. cit.). Of the forty-one senior officers interviewed for the book (all of them generals), only seven were black. Ratliff (op. cit., p.141) also notes that by the late 1980s only two out of fourteen Politburo members were black, and only 34 out of 146 on the Central Committee.

[37] From General del Pino speaks, The Cuban-American National Foundation, Washington, DC, 1987, p.14. Del Pino (op. cit., p.61) also claimed that the FAR's political officers often took normal transport flights within Angola, and then persuaded the pilots to divert over a UNITA area for a short while so

This accusation – although repeated by several other veterans – remains unsubstantiated.[38] Other sources have also claimed that several senior FAR officers used their influence in the armed forces to get their lovers registered as 'internationalist workers' so that they could be brought secretly over to Angola, where they would be kept in a luxurious lifestyle but nevertheless received the usual diplomas and medals when they returned to Cuba.[39] One such case involving a young Cuban woman named Patricia de la Cruz involved the highly-decorated Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, and would prove to be the first of many accusations of moral corruption levelled at him on his return from Angola (see Chapter 12).[40] Like all of the above accusations of corruption in the FAR, this also requires further investigation.

## Procedure for travelling to Angola

Once the full quota of internationalists had been selected they were immediately assigned to their units, the reservists in general being appointed to officer or specialist roles in their old units while the inexperienced national servicemen made up the bulk of the soldiers. Raw recruits received a minimum of 45 days basic training (soldiers assigned to more specialised tasks took longer, e.g. a tank driver would take an average of six months to train), although in special circumstances this might be reduced if there was an emergency in Angola.[41] No internationalists were allowed to tell anyone where they were going (though few actually knew themselves until only a

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that they could claim that they had been on a combat mission, entitling them to a first-grade medal when they returned to Cuba.

[38] Che Guevara's daughter Aliusha – who trained as a specialist in allergies (inspired by her father's chronic asthma) – served on internationalist missions in Nicaragua and Angola in the 1980s (Anderson, op. cit., p.751), although whether her postings were 'cushier' than other internationalists has not been recorded.

[39] Oppenheimer, op. cit., pp.89-90.

[40] According to Oppenheimer (op. cit., p.90), after Patricia de la Cruz split up with her officer boyfriend on arriving in Angola, she alleged that she was forced to have group sex with Ochoa and Tony de la Guardia as well as perform lesbian acts. These accusations reached Raúl Castro who raised them with Ochoa in a stormy interview in June 1989.

[41] One veteran recounted how he was part of an emergency call-up in January 1983 and only received thirty days accelerated training before leaving for Angola. In his opinion those who had had no previous military experience learnt very little on the course and went to Angola poorly prepared (interview in Havana, September 1999). Another veteran (an ex-FAR officer) recounted that he only received his military training once he had arrived in Angola, at the Cuban military camp near the

few days before departure), and it was only once the Cuban operation in Angola had become firmly established (around 1980) that internationalists began to talk more openly about their missions.[42] Internationalist soldiers were usually issued with their uniforms, dog-tags and weaponry before leaving Cuba,[43] although much of the heavy or specialised equipment (such as tanks, BM-21s or armoured cars) was sent directly from the Soviet Union to Angola where it was operated by the Cubans and (eventually) handed on to the FAPLA. The vast bulk of the troops went by ship to Angola in contingents of around 1,000 men, and the transport ships Leonid Sovinov, Vietnam, Trece de marzo and Habano made dozens of crossings throughout the war, the Habano later being sunk during a South African Special Forces raid on Namibe in June 1986 (see Chapter 9). Full units were usually seen off from Havana or Mariel by senior FAR officers – often by Fidel or Raúl Castro themselves – and after an average crossing of fourteen days (usually via the Canaries) on arrival in Angola they were immediately separated into their different units and posted to wherever they were needed.[44]

The vast majority of officers, weapons specialists and civilian internationalists went by air, however, using a slightly different procedure. Those due to fly to Angola were gathered at concentration points around Havana (for example, at Lomba Blanca [Managua]), where they were issued with typically Cuban civilian clothes (such as guayaberas [loose shirts]), a suitcase and a Cuban passport before boarding the aircraft for Angola. It was essential that all Cuban internationalists were issued with passports – a deliberately time-consuming and expensive procedure in Cuba – in case an incident arose en route (such as an aircraft breaking down in Sal) which would require them to disembark and go through customs in a third country. On arrival in Luanda, however, all internationalists (including those who had come by ship) were

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Futungo de Belas palace in Luanda. This appears to have been normal procedure for many of the officers and specialists sent to Angola.

[42] The secrecy surrounding the missions was probably rather lax from very early on, one veteran revealing to me that even though he kept the destination of his internationalist mission secret from his family and friends, they all knew where he was going because the two ships making up his convoy – the Habano and Trece de marzo – were known to be regularly involved in the Angolan operation.

[43] One veteran recalled that being given a chapilla (dog-tag) was like being given a trophy, and was source of great personal pride when he returned to his neighbourhood.

[44] If seas were heavy crossings could take up to twenty days, often in cramped and uncomfortable conditions.

ordered by the FAR to surrender their passports, a measure apparently adopted to prevent Cubans defecting to the West (one such Cuban had fled to Portugal from Angola during Operation Carlota).[45] This measure caused great resentment among the internationalists, however, for not only did it effectively imprison them in Angola until such point as the Cuban government decided to recall them, but more controversially it did not apply to any PCC member or senior ranking officer, a clear abuse of privilege by the political and military elite.[46] Only as they were about to depart Angola for Cuba would non-Party internationalists receive their passports back, a measure which ensured the FAR (and by extension the Cuban government) maintained just as much control over Cubans' movements abroad as it did in Cuba itself.

## Charges for Cuban internationalist soldiers and civilians

The issue of who exactly paid for the Cuban operation in Angola – both the military and the civilian parts – is still hotly disputed. According to the Cuban government, all military aid was provided to the MPLA government free of charge, the Cubans providing the manpower while the Soviets provided all the weaponry, supplies and equipment for both the FAPLA and the Cuban troops posted there.[47] Humanitarian aid was initially free too, but in 1977 Luanda committed itself to paying the living expenses of the civilian internationalists – including food, lodging and a small stipend – with an additional increase scheduled for 1978.[48] The decision to charge the MPLA for humanitarian assistance was taken because Angola was an oil-exporting country,[49]

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[45] Cubans wishing to defect en route had no chance to do so. The most common refuelling stops were La Palma (in the Canary Islands) where the ships were quarantined throughout their stay, and Sal, a remote island in Cape Verde nearly 400 miles from the nearest (African) coast.

[46] One veteran (an ex-FAR officer) was particularly incensed by this dual system for passports and felt it was a grievous infringement of his civil rights, whereas several others (all ex-servicemen) accepted the disparity with compliant resignation.

[47] In an interview in 1985 (reprinted in Deutchmann, op. cit., p.96) Castro declared that "[o]ur military cooperation has never been paid for in any country in the world where we have given it, never! Neither in Angola nor anywhere else". This contrasts with Juan M del Águila (in Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., p.137) & Anthony G Pazzanita ('The Conflict Resolution Process in Angola', The Journal of Modern African Affairs, 29, 1, 1991, p.96) who claim that Cuban soldiers, lieutenants and colonels cost $1,000, $2,000 and $5,000 per day respectively, giving no source for their data.

[48] Castro's interview with Eric Honecker, op. cit..

[49] By 1987 Cuba was providing internationalist aid to nearly 30 countries, but very few of them were asked to pay for it, most notably Libya, Algeria, and Iraq (which received the aid free after the war with

but the exact amount of money actually paid to Cuba is still contested. In 1989 Castro declared that between 1978 and 1984 Angola paid the Cuban government $20 million per year for its humanitarian operation, an amount he described as a 'modest fee' given that any other country would have charged four to five times that amount.[50] Other sources, however, maintain that Cuba was making between $300 and $700 million per year from its Angolan mission, much of this money made from the difference between the amount the Cuban government received per internationalist and the actual salary they paid them back in Cuba.[51] Whatever form of financial agreement the Cuban government did come to with Luanda was to be short-lived, however, as by the early 1980s – with the Angolan economy grinding to a halt under the UNITA onslaught and with Angola's foreign debt mushrooming alarmingly – the MPLA was increasingly unable to meet its financial commitments. Finally, after a visit by Dos Santos to Havana in March 1984, the Cuban government agreed that Angola would no longer have to pay for the civilian internationalists in Angola, and they were provided free of charge for the remainder of the Cuban operation.[52]

## Experience of internationalist soldiers serving in Angola, 1975-1991

The experience of Cuban internationalist soldiers serving in Angola varied greatly depending on where they were posted, and what role they were assigned to perform. For the soldiers garrisoning the main cities – such as Luanda, Benguela and Lubango

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Iran began). All were oil-exporting countries which had benefited from the 1973 OPEC price rise (Gianni Miná's interview with Fidel Castro, op. cit., p.205 & Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., p.54).

[50] Case 1/1989: End of the Cuban connection, José Martí Publishing House, Havana, 1989, p.396. Text of Castro's speech reads: "... every year we received 20 million dollars for our civilian technical cooperation programme, a very reasonable price given that we had thousands of people there, civilian and not military because we never charged for military cooperation. But we had thousands of workers there including teachers and doctors, and so [Cuba] was receiving about 20 million dollars, charging a modest fee, because any other foreign technician charged four or five times that much".

[51] Estimates of the annual amount paid by the MPLA government for Cuba's internationalist assistance range from $300-$400 million (Crocker, op. cit., p.341), through $440 million (Nicole Boyer, 'La guerre, partout et nulle part', published in La Croix, L'Évenement, France, 19 September 1987) & $500 million (Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., p.138) to as high as $700 million (Ratliff, op. cit., p.141). Díaz-Briquets (op. cit., p.54) notes that a Cuban doctor with eight years experience cost the Angolan government around $1,000 per month, about one quarter of the cost of a similarly-qualified WHO doctor. He also notes, however, that Cuban doctors only received a salary 350 pesos per month in Cuba (about $450 at official exchange rates), implying that the Cuban government pocketed the difference. Cuban teachers allegedly cost $600 per month and were paid significantly less in Cuba.

– the living conditions were on the whole good. Most soldiers were assigned exclusively to garrison duty and although they were housed in separate camps from the FAPLA and forbidden all contact with the local population (unless authorised), there was enough food and entertainment inside the camps – including bars and even cinemas – to keep the troops happy. Like the civilian internationalists (see below), senior and specialist officers – such as pilots and weapons experts – were housed in their own buildings in the city centre where they ate, slept and socialised, and most had additional privileges such as being able to visit the FAR officers' club at the Quinta Rosa Linda (near the Futungo de Belas palace in Luanda). The soldiers based in remote, often tiny outposts in Huíla, Moxico and Cuando Cubango endured far worse conditions, however, with infrequent deliveries of supplies and the vast emptiness of the Angolan interior contributing to their boredom and frustration.[53] Several veterans recounted eating nothing but tinned ham for six months, and then corned beef for the next six.[54] Ironically the FAR's policy of keeping Cuban troops out of the firing-line contributed to the monotony of life in the Angolan interior, and coupled with the chronic shortages of supplies it was only a matter of time before Cubans started sneaking out of camp to scavenge for what they could find in the area. With the steady growth of UNITA activity in southern and eastern Angola, however, this soon became a dangerous exercise,[55] and Cubans inevitably turned to the only other source of goods available to them, the 'candonga' ('black market').

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[52] Case 1/1989, op. cit., p.396 & Boyer, op. cit., p.2. According to Castro the decision was taken after the combined effects of the battle of Cangamba (August 1983) and a fresh South African invasion (Operation Askari, December 1983) had plunged Angola into chaos (see next chapter).

[53] Typical Cuban units enduring these conditions were at Cangamba (Moxico, scene of a fierce battle in August 1983), Jamba & Tchibemba (both in Huíla), and Cuchi (Cuando Cubango).

[54] One veteran noted that the remotest Cuban units posted in the depths of the bush often had to rely on what they could hunt to survive, a dangerous situation in a country whose wildlife had been ravaged by years of warfare.

[55] One Cuban veteran recounted how UNITA would lay elaborate booby-traps on fruit-bearing trees near to the Cuban camps. Half a dozen Claymore anti-personnel mines (with a lethal range of 50 yards) would be laid around a tree with invisible trip-wires attached to the ripest fruits. Cubans were expecting booby-traps, however, and would often spend hours defusing them (or shooting at them from a safe distance) to get at the fruit. Inevitably some injuries were sustained during these 'scavenging' hunts. Some Cubans even went fishing using grenades.

## The 'candonga' (black market) in Angola

As one would expect for a country ravaged by over a decade of warfare and a growing guerrilla insurgency, by the late 1970s Angola had developed a vibrant and lucrative black market supplying everything from basic foods and luxury items to weaponry and rare medications, much of its stolen from the docks in Luanda or Benguela.[56] Each town or city had its own 'candonga' (market place) – some of which were enormous (Luanda's 'Roque Santeiro' candonga was throughout the 1980s the largest single marketplace in the world)[57] – and although these were strictly off-limits to internationalists they quickly became the hub of all trading and commercial activity between the Angolans and Cubans. Black market deals between foreign soldiers and local populations are nothing new in warfare – indeed they have probably occurred during every major military confrontation in history – but the Cubans were to prove particularly adept at dealing on the Angolan candonga, having had years of experience surviving in Cuba's own equally corrupt and starved economy.[58] Despite the threat of severe penalties for being caught in the candonga, many Cubans sneaked out of their camps to buy supplies there, to trade goods and occasionally to negotiate large deals. The most common items traded by the Cubans were cigarettes ('Populares'), rum and clothes (such as t-shirts) which were exchanged for fruit, beer and the local moonshine ('azuquim' or 'massambala').[59] Surprisingly there was no

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[56] One veteran remembered that during a cholera outbreak in Luanda in 1986 the Cuban government donated four million antibiotic pills which it shipped directly to Luanda. However, at least half of these 'disappeared' from the docks and soon turned up in Luanda's candongas. He also alleged that Angolan medical staff stole medicines (such as penicillin) from the hospitals and sold them on the candonga.

[57] Luanda had two enormous candongas: the largest, 'Roque Santeiro' was named after a popular Brazilian soap-opera and is located in the north of Luanda along the road to Cacuaco; the origin of the name of the smaller (though still huge) 'Tira Bikini' (literally 'take off your bikini') is probably humorous.

[58] The Cuban spirit of survival and adaptability is encapsulated by the three most commonly used verbs in Havana: 'resolver', 'inventar' and 'escapar'. 'Resolver' ('to resolve') roughly translates as 'to sort out' or simply 'find', as in 'resolví unos zapatos para mi hija' ('I managed to find some shoes for my daughter'). 'Inventar' is the art of creating a meal for a family while lacking most (or even all) of the ingredients. And finally 'escapar' is to 'get by', as in 'me escapo' ('I get by'), although on many occasions Cubans have taken a more literal interpretation of that verb (in 1967, 1980 and 1994).

[59] A packet of 'Populares' would fetch 1,000 kwanza, enough to buy a bucket of fruit, but care had to be taken as UNITA knew that Cubans frequented the candongas and some had injected the fruit with poison. One Cuban recounted that several of the men in his unit became seriously ill with food-poisoning from fruit UNITA had tampered with, but all of them made full recoveries. Following this incident, Cubans insisted that traders tasted the fruit before selling it as proof it wasn't poisoned. One veteran admitted stealing the mattresses from the Cuban medical ward when the doctors weren't

trade in Cuban cigars (except between Cubans) as they were not popular among the Angolans, although there are rumours that UNITA traded South African 'Castle' beer with the FAPLA for Cuban cigars during the battle of Cuito Cuanavale (see Chapter 10). Often Cubans (particularly in the south) also traded with local SWAPO units in the area, and very quickly a complex trade network developed between the Cubans, SWAPO and the candonga – on occasion involving UNITA too.[60]

One particularly controversial scam concerned the trading of used AK-47s and involved nearly all the forces fighting in southern Angola. The AK-47 (or its modified version the AKM) was the most common infantry weapon issued to the FAPLA during the Angolan War (it is the most produced weapon in history), and many of these machine-guns ended up in UNITA hands, either seized from dead or captured FAPLA soldiers or traded with them in secret.[61] Cubans would then capture these AK-47s from UNITA after clashes on patrol, bury them in crates until the time was right, and then sell them on to SWAPO guerrillas who were mostly issued with outdated Yugoslav rifles.[62] Occasionally SWAPO guerrillas would then trade these old AK-47s for newer ones recently issued to the FAPLA, and the trade cycle was complete. On occasion – when they had nothing to trade – some Cubans would resort to elaborate scams in the candonga, the most common involving two Cubans creating a diversion (such as starting a bogus fight or firing an AK-47 in the air) while a third grabbed all he could from the nearest stall and ran off. Cubans had to be careful, however, as all candongas near Cuban units were patrolled by FAPLA and Cuban military police (the 'green berets'), and if you were caught in the candonga without

looking and selling them at the candonga. A shortage of alcohol was a constant irritation to the troops who received only one bottle of rum per seven men each month (high-ranking officers received up to four bottles each). Often men would pool their rum and swap one bottle of it for a container of local moonshine (usually five litres), although if they were caught drinking it they were severely punished. One veteran recalled that he would bury the azuquim underground and drink it through a straw when no officers were looking.

[60] SWAPO guerrillas appear to have been chronically short of ammunition and Cuban 'inventos' (scams) met this shortfall. One common scam involved Cubans taking a full box of bullets to the firing range but only firing off half of them. The extra bullets would then be hidden and later traded with SWAPO for tinned sardines which could in turn be traded on the candonga for fruit or drink.

[61] Trading between the FAPLA and UNITA was very common during the Angolan War, indeed many FAPLA were secretly UNITA sympathizers. See section on 'Cuban-Angolan relations' for full discussion of this issue.

[62] SWAPO would pay around 6,000 kwanza for an AK-47, enough to buy a large amount of supplies on the candonga.

permission the most common punishment was five days in the hole.[63] Some Cubans escaped detection by wearing FAPLA uniforms they had either stolen or traded (most black Cubans were indistinguishable from the FAPLA except for their uniform), but the local Angolan traders who suffered at the hands of Cuban scams soon cottoned onto their deception and often pointed Cubans out to the military police.[64] The candonga was not out of bounds for the FAR officers, however, and they regularly visited it to buy supplies, trade and occasionally negotiate large deals – all under the pretext of looking for Cuban soldiers who were AWOL. The sheer magnitude of some of the deals done, involving sugar, ivory and precious stones, and the high-ranking officers they involved – Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez among them – will be discussed fully in Chapter 12.

**The 'caravanas' (supply convoys)**

The only other relief from boredom for Cuban soldiers based outside the cities were the 'caravanas' – the regular convoys which carried supplies overland from Lobito, Namibe and Huambo to the various garrisons between Lubango and Menongue, and occasionally into Cunene and Cuando Cubango.[65] Every Cuban soldier based in the south was obliged to carry out a minimum of five caravanas during his time in Angola, but by the war's end some Cubans had been on five times as many, more often than not to escape the boredom of camp life.[66] Most caravanas were made up of a mixture of FAPLA, Cuban and occasionally SWAPO troops, and the more regular routes soon acquired (rather predictable) nicknames from the troops, the most famous

[63] 'The hole' was quite literally a hole in the ground with bars letting in the light, rain, etc. Cubans were made to remove their shoes and spend an average of five days down there before being let out. Some units also had weekly checks of their possessions and if anything bought illegally on the candonga was found that soldier was given extended guard duty as a punishment.

[64] One veteran noted – with respect – that "some Angolans were almost Cuban" ("había negros que eran como cubanos"), meaning they were too smart to fall for the scams.

[65] The main Cuban garrisons along the Namibe-Menongue railway line were at Namibe, Humpata, Lubango, Matala, Dongo, Jamba, Kuvango, Cuchi and Menongue, with many smaller units scattered evenly north and south of the railway line.

[66] First-timers on the caravana were nicknamed 'muñeco' by the other Cubans, supposedly a reference to 'La Muñeca' transit camp in Luanda which they all passed through (César Gómez Chacón, Cuito Cuanavale: viaje al centro de los héroes, Editorial Letras Cubanas, Havana, 1989, p.120). The term may have had a more ironic origin, however, as 'muñeco' also means 'puppet' or 'pawn' in Spanish, and the adjective 'muñequado' means 'jumpy' or 'nervous' – any or all of which could have been applied to the newcomers.

ones being the 'Che Guevara', 'Antonio Maceo' and 'Camilo Cienfuegos' caravanas. Supplying forward FAPLA units in Cuito Cuanavale was the principal responsibility of the FAPLA's 8th Brigade (based in Menongue), but as the fighting with UNITA and SADF forces increased in late 1987 these eventually became joint FAPLA-Cuban convoys, the Cubans who accompanied them experiencing some of the heaviest fighting of the campaign.[67] These supply convoys were crucial for the maintenance of the ATS Defence Line and for the survival of the dozens of smaller Cuban units dotted across southern Angola, and UNITA was quick to recognise that by attacking the caravanas they could weaken the FAPLA-Cuban grip on the whole region. With UNITA expanding its operations ever northward these caravanas increasingly passed through UNITA-controlled territory, and both sides developed sophisticated tactics and techniques to outwit each other in the confrontations which occurred.

The FAPLA-Cuban caravanas faced three principal dangers from UNITA – landmines, ambush and air attack (by the SAAF) – all of which shaped the make-up of the column itself. A typical convoy would be led by a bulldozer driving down the middle of the road with its pincers down, each subsequent vehicle following directly in its tracks.[68] Should the bulldozer detonate a mine, the damage would be minimal and the convoy could restart its progress relatively quickly.[69] Next came the BTR-60 (a large Soviet armoured car with top-mounted machine-guns carrying up to a dozen men) which was ideal for fighting off ambushes, then a BMP-1 (a small tank with wire-guided missiles) for use against other armoured vehicles, and then the AA-defences (usually a C-1 or C-10 battery, although there were occasionally also BM-

[67] The decision to mix Cuban and FAPLA columns was taken in mid-February 1988, just as the fighting around Cuito Cuanavale was hotting up. Whenever supplies were desperately needed and a FAPLA column was not ready to leave, however, Cuban columns often made the hazardous trip from Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale on their own (Gómez Chacón, op. cit., pp.118-119).

[68] By following directly in the bulldozer's tracks vehicles were unlikely to set off undiscovered mines. Tanks, however, were much wider than bulldozers and occasionally set off mines laid on the edge of the road. On the drive from Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale in March 1998 I saw the wrecks of five FAPLA-Cuban tanks (T-35 and T-55) which had been destroyed by UNITA mines. BTR's were designed to withstand anti-tank mines, however, and several veterans recounted seeing these enormous armoured cars being hurled up to fifty yards by an explosion only to restart their advance a few minutes later with only superficial injuries to their occupants.

[69] Veterans recounted that occasionally the bulldozers would detonate large anti-tank mines, blowing off the pincers and causing some light injuries, but convoys usually carried spare pincers which could be fitted quickly.

21s and 130mm guns).[70] Only after all these vehicles had passed did the five to ten supply vehicles themselves appear (usually containing food, clothes and ammunition), protected from behind by a similar succession of military vehicles, this time in reverse order.[71] Caravanas were usually around twenty vehicles in length, but some became so clogged with vehicles that they stretched for over five miles, allowing UNITA to attack first the front and then the back of the convoy without the other end knowing about it.[72] Ambushes were frequent – usually launched the moment one of the vehicles set off a mine – and by the end of the war the route from Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale was littered with the wrecks of over 150 FAPLA-Cuban vehicles, one single ambush destroying no less than thirty-six petrol tankers en route to re-supply the faltering 1987 offensive (see Chapter 10).[73]

UNITA sappers were particularly adept at laying mines and they adopted sophisticated tactics for drawing the convoys into their minefields. Each caravana had a platoon of at least half a dozen sappers who were called to the front of the convoy if anything suspicious appeared on the road, so UNITA regularly laid a series of decoy mines (which could easily be detected and destroyed) to draw the sappers' attention away from a further set of mines buried several hundred yards down the road.[74] UNITA would often set their anti-tank mines with a twenty-second delay fuse, calculating that this would be the exact moment when the caravana's command

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[70] This order has been reconstructed from accounts by Cuban veterans. The order of the caravanas varied enormously, of course, and each one may also have contained 0.80mm & 120mm guns, bridge-laying vehicles, jeeps and other assorted vehicles.

[71] Surprisingly Angolan civilians also travelled with these convoys as they were very often the only means of transport in the war-torn region, and were unlikely to be attacked by the groups of bandits which continue to operate in southern Angola to this day.

[72] César Gómez Chacón (op. cit., p.51) notes that the FAPLA-Cuban convoy he travelled with from Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale was 8km (five miles) long.

[73] Travelling between Cuatir and Cuito Cuanavale in early 1988. Cuban journalist César Gómez Chacón counted 165 wrecks (op. cit., p.128). In less than one mile Roger Ricardo Luis (Prepárense a vivir: crónicas de Cuito Cuanavale, Editora Política, Havana, 1989, p.106) counted nine burned-out vehicles and an overturned tank. One veteran (in interview) recalled that on 19 May 1983 an anti-tank mine killed 24 Cubans being transported by truck from Lubango to their regiment in Matala. Tragically, they had only arrived in Angola a few days before and Matala was to be their first posting. The wrecks of the 36 petrol tankers are still clearly visible on the road between Longa and Cuito Cuanavale (just east of Masseca), and according to FAPLA veterans (in interview) they formed the bulk of an extraordinary supply column which was sent to help the crumbling 1987 offensive, but which was betrayed to UNITA by a local FAPLA commander.

[74] One sapper recalled that UNITA would often go to great lengths to disguise the second set of mines, occasionally re-tarring the road surface under which the mines were buried to disguise them, while simultaneously leaving messy clues to reveal the location of the first set of decoy mines.

vehicle passed over them, the death (or incapacitation) of the commander spreading confusion through the column just as UNITA launched its ambush. UNITA's successful use of this tactic is a clear indication that their sappers were studying the sequence of vehicles which made up a typical FAPLA-Cuban caravana, and many veterans (Cuban and Angolan) have suggested that they had access to inside information (probably from sympathisers in the FAPLA). The combined effect of searching for landmines and fighting off ambushes inevitably slowed down the caravanas, and it was common for the 115-mile journey between Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale to take over ten days, and up to a month to complete the round-trip.[75] The caravanas were nevertheless successful in their mission to maintain the FAPLA and Cuban units posted around the ATS Defence Line, and in recognition of this fact the Cuban regime made a Rambo-style film celebrating their exploits – called simply Caravana (1989) – during the Cuban withdrawal.[76]

**Patrolling and the Search-And-Destroy (SAD) missions**

Throughout the war Cuban units in southern and eastern Angola patrolled aggressively in the areas surrounding their camps, laying regular ambushes and frequently clashing with local UNITA elements. Cuban units needed to show the utmost vigilance on patrol and they constantly varied their routes and routines as UNITA was known to be observing them very carefully, and would often lay anti-personnel mines along their return route to base.[77] Cuban patrols also faced danger from the local wildlife, although ironically not from being attacked but rather from the confusion caused by these animals moving about in a tense war zone. One veteran serving on a caravana recalled a monkey setting off a string of eight Claymore anti-personnel mines just as the caravana was passing (injuring several Cubans),[78] while another admitted that his platoon got into a heavy fire fight with what they thought

[75] Gómez Chacón (op. cit., pp.126-127) notes that the journey time for caravanas gradually decreased as AA defences in southern Angola improved and FAPLA-Cuban forces grew in the area.
[76] Luís Alberto García also made a film about Angola – Algo más que soñar (Something else to dream about) – for which he was rewarded with a beautiful house in Havana (according to del Pino, op. cit., p.31).
[77] One Cuban veteran recalled that the only fatality in his sapper unit in nearly two years was caused by a soldier failing to follow procedure and returning along the same route he used to leave the camp, eventually stepping on a landmine UNITA had laid while he was out on patrol.

was a UNITA patrol only to discover – after much shooting – that they had stumbled on a whoop of monkeys (the bullets ricocheting off the trees had led the Cubans to believe they were being fired at).[79] The most controversial of the joint Cuban-FAPLA operations in southern Angola, however, were the Search-And-Destroy (SAD) missions aimed at rooting out UNITA sympathisers in the area. Mixed FAPLA-Cuban units in southern Angola regularly carried out SAD raids on suspected UNITA villages in the area, very much in the same way as American units raided Vietcong villages during the Vietnam War. Suspected kimbos (villages) were surrounded and the inhabitants driven out with machine-gun fire (this was intended to frighten them off and was usually directed over the roofs).[80] The kimbo was then searched for hidden supplies, ammunition and any valuables, all of which would be confiscated (and a great deal of it looted by the FAPLA-Cuban troops) before the entire kimbo was set alight and the troops withdrew. Although no evidence has come to light of any 'My Lai'-style massacres,[81] it seems highly probable that some unarmed Angolan civilians were killed during these SAD missions, and many Cubans who took part are still traumatised by the experience.[82]

Aside from the caravanas, patrols and occasional SAD missions, most Cuban units posted in Angola saw very little action at all, and the monotony of life in the

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[78] Luis, op. cit., p.107.

[79] García Márquez (op. cit., p.55) also notes rather comically that one Cuban commander "fell at the height of battle into an elephant trap". No corroborated stories of Cubans being eaten by wild animals have yet surfaced, although one veteran remembered several Cubans who went out hunting, got lost in the wilderness and eventually died from thirst.

[80] One veteran who took part in two SAD missions says that he didn't see any Angolans killed, but he nevertheless admitted that some might have been hit inadvertently when the kimbo was first machine-gunned.

[81] The massacre of over 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in and around the village of My Lai (Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam) occurred on 16 March 1968. Led by Lieut. William Calley, American troops from the 11th Brigade entered My Lai and over several hours killed 357 unarmed civilians in the village, and around 150 others in the surrounding area. When the story broke a year later it caused an enormous scandal in the USA, but in the end only twelve low-ranking officers were ever brought to trial, and their ring-leader Lieut. Calley served no more than three years under house arrest until he was paroled in 1974.

[82] One Angolan veteran I interviewed who was involved in joint FAPLA-Cuban operations against UNITA said that the Cubans were strongly opposed to the FAPLA committing atrocities, and had on more than one occasion restrained FAPLA commanders when their troops were about to go on the rampage. This testimony strongly suggests that Cubans were not involved in the many massacres of unarmed civilians which occurred during the war (see Full Chronology for details of at least a dozen between 1975 and 1991), but the likelihood that at least a few unarmed Angolan civilians were killed during Cuban-FAPLA operations remains high.

remoteness of the Angolan interior inevitably drove some over the edge.[83] Officers received one month's leave for every six they spent in Angola and they usually took this in Cuba, but this perk did not apply to ordinary soldiers, and many Cubans spent over two years in Africa without seeing their families and friends back in Cuba. Reservists suffered in particular because – unlike their younger comrades on national service – most had left old parents, spouses and children back in Cuba, often in difficult financial straits. The strain of being apart, often for years at a time, inevitably broke up many marriages and families, and for this reason there is much bitterness among the reservist veterans who feel that their personal sacrifice in Angola has been completely forgotten by the Cuban regime.[84] There were reports of occasional suicides (an event not uncommon in war) and isolated violent confrontations between Cuban soldiers, at least one resulting in a duel.[85] Generally, however, discipline in the Cuban camps was good (bar the occasional trip to the candonga), and during Cuba's sixteen-year occupation of Angola there were very few reported rapes, murders and robberies considering the size of the forces posted there.[86]

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[83] Those who saw the most action were the Special Forces units (whose operations were secret) and those involved in the 'LCB' against UNITA. Some units were occasionally caught up in fighting unintentionally, however, for example at Cangamba (see next chapter).

[84] Equally tragic is the fate of thousands of Cuban men who worked in Cuba's 'Micro-Brigades' – specialized construction teams – who toiled for years on ambitious projects with the promise of their own house at the end. Inevitably the long work hours and extended absences from home destroyed many marriages, and many microbrigadistas lost not only their wives and families in the divorce but also the house they had worked for decades to own (author's interview with ex-microbrigadista, Havana, September 1997).

[85] One veteran (in interview) who served as the judge of a military tribunal in Angola recalled a case in 1978 involving two Cuban soldiers from the Tchibemba regiment in southern Huíla. Both had been posted in this remote garrison for nearly two years without a break, and one night after getting drunk on the local moonshine ('massambala') they got into a fierce argument. A third soldier (who was equally drunk) suggested they settle it with a duel, and both men staggered off into the bush, stood back-to-back, walked twenty paces, turned and fired off dozens of shots at each other, luckily only causing light wounds. Both were brought before the military tribunal, but there was some confusion over how they should be charged as the 1888 law against duelling had been removed from the statute books in 1902, and no duellists had been brought to trial since that date. In the end they were sentenced to two years privation of liberty (a sort of house of arrest) for 'misuse of fire-arms', a sentence they were allowed to carry out whilst still in Angola.

[86] No official figures for offences tried by the Cuban military tribunals in Angola have been published, but one former FAR judge (in interview) told me that during a year-long stint in southern Angola in 1985 only around 50 offences were brought to trial, and 'insignificant' number considering there were over 20,000 Cuban troops in the region. In Cuba itself he would have dealt with at least ten times that number of offences in that amount of time. Domínguez (in Blasier & Mesa Lago, op. cit., p.63) notes that there was some troop insubordination during Operation Carlota, but gives no source for this allegation, adding only that "its extent cannot be determined and was probably limited". According to Domínguez, the war "also worsened relations between the party and some professional military officers, leading to an exacerbation of political strains within the armed forces", but this allegation is also unsubstantiated.

As the Cuban operation dragged on into the late 1980s, there was nevertheless a noticeable drop in the enthusiasm of the Cubans serving in Angola, and although there was still a strong sense of camaraderie among the men in the field, many lacked the ideological conviction of their internationalist predecessors from the 1960s.[87] This change in attitude was inevitable with the Cuban occupation extending itself indefinitely, and once the opportunity of travelling to Africa lost its exotic appeal and merely became a 'tour of duty', the Cuban regime increasingly turned to material incentives to encourage volunteers (see section on salaries).

## Cuban military relations with the Angolans

For two allied armies supposedly fighting together against a common enemy, Cuban-FAPLA relations in Angola were particularly troubled. The majority of Cuban troops garrisoning the cities north of the ATS Defence Line were accommodated in different camps from their FAPLA allies under a separate command structure, and what little contact did occur (for example between Cuban military instructors and FAPLA recruits) was on the whole amicable and professional.[88] The situation for Cuban units posted in southern Angola was quite different, however, for they regularly fought alongside the FAPLA in joint operations against UNITA – including patrols, ambushes and caravanas – and their working relationship was far from the harmonious and brotherly picture painted by the Cuban regime.[89] Since the first LCB operations in 1977 Cuban commanders had complained about the poor quality of

[87] The main reason for this appears to be that by the late 1970s Cuba was a radically different country from the heady days of the early 1960s. Between 1959 and the crisis of 1968 the Cuban Revolution had its golden years, with thousands of young Cubans throwing their youth and enthusiasm into the idealistic struggle to create a better world. Following the failed 10 Million Ton harvest fiasco, however, and the conversion of Cuba into a recognizably Communist State (under the 'Institutionalisation' process), enthusiasm for the Revolution started to wane, and it is no coincidence that Cuba's second panicked evacuation (the Mariel boatlift) occurred only four years after Cuba officially became a Communist state. By the late 1980s disenchantment with the Cuban system had grown among ordinary Cubans, and this inevitably undermined their enthusiasm for and ideological commitment to the Angolan war.

[88] Many Angolans who were trained by the Cubans still remember them with affection. The most common phrases which cropped up in interview were 'they got on well with everyone', 'they behaved very well towards us' and 'we miss them' ('sentimos saudades deles').

[89] According to Cuban propaganda Angolans referred to Cubans as 'primo' (cousin), affectionately acknowledging their shared historical struggle against oppression. One FAR officer I interviewed, however, refused to let the Angolans call him 'primo', insisting that they used the term condescendingly and almost as an insult, a view echoed by several other veterans I interviewed.

FAPLA troops whose incompetence and indiscipline constantly undermined the success of joint operations, but despite the training programme launched in 1976 and mammoth deliveries of Soviet weaponry, the average quality of FAPLA troops improved little.[90] In part this was due to the brutal recruiting methods adopted by the FAPLA, the most notorious of which involved surrounding candongas or cinemas with military forces, rounding up all the able-bodied males they could find inside and then immediately flying them down to the southern front for combat.[91] Such methods ensured that the majority of front-line troops were demoralised, inexperienced and motivated by little more than a desire to get through the war alive, and this contributed to the high percentage of Angolans who deserted the FAPLA, some going over to UNITA. The realisation that FAPLA deserters were joining UNITA, informing on current Cuban-FAPLA operations, and even trading weaponry with UNITA, bred in the Cubans a deep sense of mistrust for their Angolan allies, and rapidly pushed them into closer alliance with their other ally in the region, SWAPO.[92]

In many ways SWAPO guerrillas were in a similar position to the Cubans: both were foreigners in Angola fighting another country's war against an enemy (UNITA) which was not technically their own. But critically both saw the Angolan war as an extension of their own national struggles – for SWAPO the war against South Africa for Namibian independence, for Cuba the struggle against the USA and (more contentiously) world imperialism – and as the conflict intensified they discovered to their dismay that their ideological commitment to the war was actually far stronger

[90] Several veterans recalled coming across FAPLA tanks and armoured cars abandoned by their FAPLA crews ostensibly because they were beyond repair, only to discover that they had simply run out of diesel. By the time the Cubans found them, however, they were usually beyond repair, their machinery having been cannibalised by the locals for spare parts and the main vehicles usually having been booby-trapped by UNITA. One such group of vehicles can still be seen 10 miles west of Menongue (at Missombo) where the FAPLA abandoned nearly forty Soviet tanks and APCs during the withdrawal from Cuito Cuanavale. According to locals the convoy stopped on hearing the news that war had broken out again in November 1992, and the troops simply abandoned their vehicles and returned home. They were quickly booby-trapped by UNITA and are now little more than rusting hulks.

[91] Several Cuban veterans (both civilian and military) witnessed these institutionalised press gangs rounding up Angolan males, a practice one veteran described as 'brutal and savage'. The memory of these round-ups left a deep scar on the Angolans, and to this day there are no public cinemas in Angola (Luanda's famous Cine Loanda is now a smart restaurant).

[92] Many veterans told stories of FAPLA soldiers defecting to UNITA, betraying military information and even murdering Cubans (although no specific case has yet come to my attention). A phrase which cropped up half a dozen times in interview was 'nunca me confia en ellos' ('I never trusted them').

than all but a few of the Angolan allies they had come to help, and that more alarmingly some of these so-called allies were in fact UNITA sympathisers.[93] In the 1980s Angola was still divided ethnically, and despite the Cuban regime's boast that all Cubans were linked through ethnic blood ties to their Angolan 'primos' (cousins), most Cubans serving there (like their internationalist predecessors twenty years before) had great difficulty understanding Angola's intense inter-tribal rivalry which permeated all institutions, especially the FAPLA itself. Uncertain of the FAPLA soldiers' loyalties, Cuban and SWAPO troops looked out for each other during joint operations,[94] and as confrontations with UNITA and the SADF increased, a strange dynamic evolved on the battlefield with Cubans, SWAPO and MK guerrillas fighting tenaciously (and often to the death) while Angolan units crumbled around them.[95] Gradually resentment grew among the FAPLA's allies at the way they were being used to fight a proxy war against the MPLA's enemies, and this resentment would eventually erupt in mutiny at an MK training camp in May 1984 (see next chapter).

Cuban military relations with Angola's civilians were exactly what one would expect from an occupying military power, however, the presence of thousands of Cuban troops arousing excitement at the prospect of employment, commerce and money, but also resentment at a new foreign power bringing war into previously peaceful regions (such as Cuito Cuanavale). Unlike the civilian internationalists who worked on a daily basis with Angolan civilians and on rare occasions socialised with them, Cuban soldiers were forbidden to fraternise with the locals and thus their only contact with

[93] Klinghoffer (op. cit., p.117) notes that the Cuban troops were "disciplined and politically dedicated to the MPLA cause and, while certainly constituting an alien force in Angola, they were very unlike the white mercenaries who were assisting the FNLA and UNITA". The ideological commitment of the Cubans' to the war was not unique, however, for many in UNITA and the SADF passionately believed in the righteousness of their cause and the concept of 'Total Onslaught'. One SADF veteran I interviewed (who had been Savimbi's main liaison officer throughout the 1980s) admitted he had been passionately committed to the war against Communist expansion but that now, looking back, he feels he will never again believe in a political ideology so strongly.

[94] For example, when on joint patrols Cuban troops would always be preceded and followed by SWAPO guerrillas, in case a FAPLA traitor in their midst attempted to shoot one of the Cubans in the back while they were in the thick of the bush (interview with Cuban sapper who served in southern Angola in the mid-1980s).

[95] During Operation Carlota the South African Cape Times reported that the Cubans were greatly admired for their courage and "rarely surrendered and simply cheerfully fought until death" (quoted in Gleijeses, 'Havana's policy in Africa, 1959-76', op. cit.). FAPLA troops, on the other hand, were famous for retreating when the fighting got thickest, and several Cuban veterans recalled their officers

them was by its very nature illegal and clandestine.[96] Cuban contacts with Angolan men were normally quite strained as they usually involved trade and business deals at the candonga which generated a large amount of distrust and ill-feeling.[97] Relations with Angolan women were, however, much warmer (if veterans' memories are anything to go by), although it is said that in the main cities they were initially offended by the Cuban habit of shouting 'piropos' (flirtatious remarks) at them, being accustomed to more restrained behaviour in public. Despite restrictions on fraternisation many Cuban-Angolan romances flourished during the war, and though very few Cubans successfully brought Angolan wives back to Cuba it is probable that some of these relationships produced the war's first Cuban-Angolan babies. Since the Cuban withdrawal in 1991, however, Angola has been in too great a state of chaos for any of these children to come forward and be identified, and it is quite possible that once peace returns (if it ever does) dozens – possibly hundreds – of Cuban-Angolan children will appear looking for their Cuban fathers.[98]

**Salaries, stipends and bonuses during the Angolan war**

Salaries for Cuban internationalist soldiers serving in Angola were strictly related to rank and seniority, and were calculated, processed and paid out by a secret department of the FAR – the 'Departamento de Abastecimiento' (Supply Department) – set up in Havana's Nuevo Vedado district in December 1972.[99] Specifically created to coordinate all the monetary activities of Cuban internationalists serving abroad – the largest contingents of whom were in Angola, Ethiopia and Grenada – the Departamento de Abastecimiento employed thirty staff who ran separate departments

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screaming at FAPLA troops to get out of their trenches and fight, on some occasions threatening to shoot them if they didn't.

[96] In the cities Cuban troops were confined to base and were forbidden to wear their uniform outside it (so as to reduce the military profile of the Cuban operation in Angola).

[97] Several Angolans I interviewed complained of 'estafas' (scams) carried out by the Cubans at the candonga, and one family in Cuito Cuanavale accused the Cuban regiment of seizing their entire herd of cattle without payment.

[98] During research in Santa Clara I heard of a local Cuban doctor who had brought a young Angolan boy back to Cuba and adopted him as his son. The man was a local hero because he had written to Fidel Castro twice for permission to bring the boy into Cuba, suggesting it is very difficult (and very rare) for Cubans to have brought Angolans back with them.

[99] Information on the Departamento de Abastecimiento was given to me in secret by a Cuban who worked there between 1977 and 1984.

dealing with the payment of salaries to the military and pensions to war widows and the wounded.[100] Much sensitive information – including genuine casualty figures and numbers of foreign personnel posted abroad – passed through the Departamento de Abastecimiento, and the operation was cloaked in the highest secrecy. The selection process for candidates to work there was particularly tough, complex mental and psychological tests accompanying the usual medical examination, and candidates' private lives were carefully vetted by G-2 (Cuba's secret police) before they were cleared to work there. As the Cuban operation in Angola expanded in the early 1980s, the Department started to employ a 'money ship' – the Soviet cruise liner Leonid Sovinov – to sail over to Angolan territorial waters and process the paperwork of thousands of Cubans before they returned to Cuba, as a means of cutting down on the chaos which normally ensued when large groups of Cubans from different provinces arrived all at once in Cuba demanding their salaries.[101] The ship was heavily-protected (it often carried huge amounts of Cuban pesos) and it regularly anchored off the Angolan coast for three days at a time, although on one occasion it remained for over a month.[102]

Cuban soldiers received their salary partly in Cuban pesos and partly in Angolan kwanzas, the pesos being paid on a monthly basis to the soldiers' families (or in the case of some officers directly into their bank account) while the kwanzas were kept 'on account' for collection when the soldier completed his service (see below). Soldiers received a salary of seven Cuban pesos (at the time worth US$7 at official Cuban rates) and 150 kwanzas (c.US$1) per month, while senior officers received

[100] Wounded soldiers received 60 pesos/month and war widows a similar amount. One sub-department dealt with the particularly sensitive issue of those killed in Angola, calculating pensions for widows or family members, and returning personal items when possible. Many families were distraught that their sons' bodies were buried where they fell in Angola instead of being returned to Cuba, and in response to complaints an enormous operation was launched in March 1989 to locate, disinter and return the bodies of all of those killed in Angola to Cuba (see last chapter for details).

[101] The Leonid Sovinov was originally a luxury cruise ship built in England, but in the early 1970s it was bought by the Soviet navy and eventually handed on to Cuba. It had a swimming pool and a tropical hothouse on board, and was understandably a popular posting for those who worked in the department. The ship never docked in any Angolan port, however, and several Cubans' only view of Angola was of its coastline. The ship was used because it was considered far cheaper (and easier) to send the ship regularly from Cuba rather than having to transfer large amounts of Cuban pesos to Angola with all the attendant risks and costs.

[102] One Cuban veteran was on the Leonid Sovinov when it anchored for a total of 36 days off the Angolan coast, processing payments for the Cuban internationalist forces.

twenty-four pesos and 3,000 kwanzas per month (plus a better ration of luxuries).[103] Thus at the end of a two year mission the average soldier would have received his basic living requirements for free but actually earned less than US$200 in total (officers fared comparatively better at over US$1,000).[104] In an effort to compensate for this paltry salary, before leaving Angola Cubans were given the opportunity to purchase clothes, electrical goods and other luxuries unavailable in Cuba in specially subsidised shops set up specifically for them in Luanda, for example at Cacuaco.[105] The day before they were due to leave Angola, Cuban soldiers would report to one of these shops where their kwanza salary would be calculated on the spot. They would then be given a list and told to go around the shop selecting items up to the value of what they had earned.[106] Soldiers on the whole could only afford electric fans ('ventiladores'), cheap stereos, watches and clothing whereas an officer's entitlement allowed him to buy videos, stereo systems and fridges (all of which were very difficult to obtain in Cuba).[107] Throughout the 1980s this bonus system was increasingly used as a sweetener for internationalists whose missions grew ever longer, and it is no exaggeration to say that by the end of the war every internationalist soldier believed he had a right to a 'ventilador' after serving in Angola.

[103] There is some disagreement over the actual size of the stipend given to Cuban soldiers in Angola. Some veterans put the amount at 300 kwanzas per month (c.$2) for soldiers and 600 (c. $4) for officers, whereas others put it as high as 1,500 (c.$11) and 4,000 (nearly $30) respectively. Either way the amounts were small and doubtless encouraged clandestine visits to the local candonga. Following the Ochoa scandal in 1989 which revealed the extent of Cuban black market dealings on the candonga, the stipend system was changed and Cubans were paid their stipends in goods (e.g. food, alcohol and tobacco). All Cuban internationalists – both military and civilian – also received all their food, accommodation and supplies (including rations of cigars and rum) for free while in Angola.

[104] The average Cuban soldier would make 168 Cuban pesos & 3,600 kwanzas (c.US$26) for a two-year mission compared to an officer's 576 pesos & 72,000 kwanzas (c.US$514) for the same time period.

[105] It is unclear when this system of buying luxuries before leaving Angola was introduced for all Cuban soldiers (officers and PCC members probably did this from the start), but it appears to have been introduced in the early 1980s once the Cuban mission in Angola became a regular 'tour of duty'. One veteran (in interview) who served in Angola in 1975 doesn't recall being given a stipend and reckoned they were introduced once the tours in Angola became longer (i.e. in the late 1970s or early 1980s).

[106] Cubans soldiers therefore never actually saw any of the kwanzas they had earned, but merely bought goods (priced as the Cuban regime saw fit) up to the value of their kwanza salary.

[107] The average video cost around 10,000 kwanzas, meaning that several soldiers would have to pool their earnings if they wanted to buy one.

## The civilian internationalist mission in Angola, 1976-1991

The humanitarian mission in Angola started shortly after the completion of the 'Second Liberation War', but although it ran in tandem with the military mission until the Cuban withdrawal in 1991 it was organised and run quite separately from the FAR. The selection and posting of civilian internationalists was carried out by a separate government organisation – Cubatécnica (renamed Logitécnica in the 1980s) – which ran Cuban humanitarian missions in over two dozen Third World countries, and Angola was to receive its special attention, absorbing over 70% of the internationalists sent to Africa each year.[108] Angola's infrastructure (which had improved greatly during the five-year boom preceding the Portuguese withdrawal) had been severely damaged by the war – at least 130 bridges being destroyed in fighting with the South Africans – and what few social services existed before the war had by 1976 broken down completely. The SADF invasion alone had caused an estimated $6.7 billion worth of damage, and during the generalised panic and looting which accompanied the flight of over 90% of the white Portuguese settlers, over 200,000 vehicles had been destroyed or stolen and the majority of factories and businesses left in ruins.[109] More serious in the long-term, however, was the flight of the vast majority of skilled workers from Angola, leaving the new country desperately short of doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers and construction workers, a shortage the Cuban government was particularly well equipped to fill following its own highly-successful medical and technical training programmes initiated in the Revolution's early years.

The selection of internationalists for the civilian mission in Angola was significantly different from the military as Cubans were chosen for their specific technical skills. All civilian internationalists were selected from the work place and were usually

[108] Domínguez, To Make a World Safe for Revolution, p.275 & Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., p.50.
[109] Figures from Muatxiânvua, op.cit., p.2 & Concepción, op. cit., p.17. Many Angolans accused fleeing Portuguese settlers of deliberately sabotaging everything they left behind to prevent their goods falling into the Angolans' hands. In Luanda the famous 'skeleton building' – a high-rise office block opposite the National Assembly which was left unfinished in 1975 – stands as a symbol of this Portuguese exodus, the Portuguese owners having allegedly poured concrete down the lift shafts so that building work could never be completed. Many vehicles were looted by the various invading forces,

singled out by their hospital or factory managers both for their proficiency and strong ideological beliefs. Nearly all those selected were either members of the PCC or UJC (Communist Youth) – a fact denied by the Cuban regime but supported by those who served in Angola – and most considered their selection for such missions as a sign of recognition by the regime.[110] On paper civilian missions were shorter – initially only nine months – but in practice most internationalists extended their mission once they were in Angola and most spent around eighteen months there before returning.[111] The term 'civilian' was in part misleading, however, for all Cubans going to Angola received basic military training, a wise precaution given the volatility of the situation in Angola but one which led to accusations that they were part of the military reserve. Castro did not entirely deny this, declaring that Cuban internationalists "must be workers and soldiers at the same time", promising not only that they would rebuild the bridges but that they would defend them too against further attacks.[112] Civilian internationalists were 'civic soldiers', dedicated to civilian tasks abroad but ready – should the occasion arise – to defend themselves and their allies. On numerous occasions civilian internationalists would be called on to fight in Angola – occasionally to save their own lives (see UNITA's attack on Sumbe in next chapter) – and often the "line between civilians and military personnel was blurred".[113] Despite this disparity, the Cuban regime nevertheless emphasised the humanitarian side of the

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and dozens of aircraft which ended up in South Africa, Zaire and other neighbouring countries were stolen from Angola during the fighting and repainted with different markings.

[110] A former nurse from Havana (in interview with author, 9 September 1997) said she had felt "rather important" when she was called in for interview because "only certain people were called up", and being one of these "had great merit". Civilian postings for Angola were in general heavily oversubscribed given the small size of the civilian contingent (c.5,000), making selection for a mission a status symbol.

[111] Like the reservists, all civilian internationalists were guaranteed their old job back once they returned, and their salary would be paid to their families whilst they were serving abroad. Food and lodging in Angola were also provided, plus a small stipend – about 1,500 kwanza (around US$30 at the time) – to buy small luxuries and extra food if necessary.

[112] Quoted in Domínguez, To make a world safe for revolution, op. cit., p.168. It is not clear when Fidel Castro made this speech, but it appears that it was around the time of the American invasion of Grenada in October 1983.

[113] Domínguez, op. cit., p.168. During the war in Angola journalists (for example, César Gómez Chacón who reported on the fighting at Cuito Cuanavale and ended up directing artillery in a heated confrontation with UNITA), doctors (García Márquez, op. cit., p.44), cameramen (Báez, op. cit., p.459), construction workers and even cooks (Gómez Chacón, op. cit., p.81) ended up fighting in battles, although almost always as a last resort. Similarly, even though 92% of Cuban personnel based in Grenada were civilians working on the construction of a new airport, all 636 construction workers had received basic military training and were involved in the short-lived defence against the invading American forces in October 1983 (figure from Domínguez, op. cit., p.168).

Cuban mission in Angola, insisting that it was the principal component of Cuban internationalism in Angola when the reality was that by 1988 civilian internationalists made up little more than 7% of Cubans serving in Angola, the rest being military.[114]

The civilian internationalists were involved in thirty-five different areas of activity in Angola, and these can be roughly divided into three principal branches – medical, teaching and technical (in particular construction). In the big cities – Luanda, Benguela and Huambo – each branch tended to be housed in its own building, and although they did occasionally mix with local Angolans (other than at work) most Cuban internationalists lived in hermetic communities, being driven in their own bus to and from work each day and eating, drinking and socialising with each other in their own buildings.[115] Cuban civilians in general had better living conditions than soldiers posted outside the main cities, and had regular access to local shops (the candonga was out of bounds) and made occasional outings to the beach, although they rarely went out at night as there was a curfew in Luanda from 10pm and Luanda's streets were known to be dangerous after dark.[116] The long working-hours and cloistered existence inevitably bred a strong sense of camaraderie among the civilian internationalists, and many now look back on their time in Angola as one the best experiences in their life.[117] Thanks to their hard work the Cuban humanitarian

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[114] In an interview with Barbara Walters in June 1977 (printed in Bohemia, Havana, 1 July 1977, p.56) Fidel Castro claimed that "Cuba's role in Africa is principally of a civilian character, and not a military character" (author's translation). By that stage, however, there were at least 36,000 Cuban troops in Angola versus a maximum of 5,000 civilian internationalists (less than 15%), and by late 1988 the military contingent would have grown to over 65,000 troops while the civilian contingent remained more or less the same, a more accurate measure of the priorities of the Cuban mission in Angola.

[115] According to one engineer who was working in Luanda, groups of Cubans were kept in the same building for their easier protection. One six-floor building he lived in *housed 800 Cuban nurses and* teachers (author's interview with engineer, Havana, 31 August 1997). Food was eaten communally in large dining rooms (usually located in the buildings), the Cubans having great difficulty eating Angolan 'funge' (a type of mashed root) while the Angolans joked about the Cuban way of cooking beans (using more liquid than the Portuguese 'feijoada') which they called 'sopa cubana' (interview with internationalist nurse).

[116] During my interviews I heard several stories of civilian internationalists who had disappeared while on service in Angola. Rumour had it that UNITA assassins would enter the main cities at night to hunt Cuban internationalists, removing their heart and testicles as trophies. UNITA guerrillas would allegedly receive thousands of kwanzas for each Cuba dog-tag they brought in. Internationalists who were obliged to go out at night (such as those working in technical plants) were always armed, and many often heard the sound of automatic gunfire or saw dead bodies in the streets.

[117] Several internationalists spoke fondly of the high group morale. One recalled that when letters arrived for the group, if even one person had failed to receive a letter then everyone else would open theirs in private so as not to hurt the other's feelings.

mission in Angola was perhaps the single most successful facet of the Cuban intervention in Angola, helping lay the foundations for Angola's social services which had been almost non-existent before Independence. This success was reflected in the rapid expansion of the humanitarian mission in Angola – which grew at an average rate of 2.7% during its first five years[118] – and by 1980 there were up to 6,000 Cuban civilians working in Angola, a level which was to remain more or less consistent for the remainder of the Cuban occupation.[119]

## The medical brigades

The first civilian contingents to arrive in Angola were the medical brigades, the first of which – comprising ten doctors and nurses – arrived in Benguela on 8 March 1976.[120] The task facing the medical mission was enormous. Following independence there was less than one doctor per 100,000 Angolans,[121] and what few hospitals existed were understaffed, lacking essential medicines and overflowing with the sick and wounded. Large medical teams were posted to Luanda's principal hospitals – the University and Prenda Hospitals – and various clinics were opened across Angola to provide basic medical treatment to people living in remote areas. Working conditions were initially difficult for the Cuban medical team who not only had to cope with Portuguese systems and practices but who also had great trouble breaking through the language barrier. This may seem surprising as Spanish and Portuguese are – at least on paper – very similar languages, but the reality is that Cuban Spanish (which is notoriously difficult for foreigners to understand) and Angolan Portuguese are very far from mutually-intelligible, and although some

[118] Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares, op. *cit., p.55.*

[119] Figures for civilian internationalists in Angola vary wildly. Valdés ('Cuba y Angola: *Una Política* de Solidaridad Internacional', op. cit., p.665) quotes US State Department estimates of 4,500 Cuban civilians in Angola, whereas Domínguez (in Blasier & Mesa Lago, op. cit., p.64) puts it at 5,000, and Henriksen (op. cit., p.74) at 6,000. Diaz-Briquets (op. cit., p.50) notes that between 1976 and 1981 a total of 17,644 Cubans served on civilian missions in Angola, although how many of them were there at one time is unclear. Based on the available evidence it thus seems reasonable to estimate that there were around 5,000 Cuban civilians working in Angola at any one time, although the total number of Cuban civilians may have exceeded this figure at certain points during the Cuban occupation.

[120] Díaz-Briquets (op. cit., p.59) notes that Cuban medical aid first started in Cabinda during the closing stages of the war, but it is likely that both brigades arrived more or less simultaneously.

[121] According to Díaz-Briquets (op. cit., p.59), in 1977 there were a total of 55 Angolan physicians for a total population of 5.5 million Angolans.

Cubans were able to muddle through with improvised 'Portuñol' the problem of communication was to dog them – and all civilian operations in Angola – throughout the Cuban occupation. Indeed many patients spoke no Portuguese at all, and often consultations would require four separate translations for the doctor, nurse, official translator and patient.[122] Many Angolans were suspicious of foreign doctors and this suspicion, coupled with their faith in traditional medicine (which often involved black magic), meant that they would wait until their health had deteriorated seriously before visiting a doctor. Given the high standard of medical treatment they received from the Cubans, however, most Angolans who visited Cuban-run hospitals made miraculous recoveries, a fact which greatly enhanced the Cuban doctors' reputation in Africa.

Cuban medical teams worked very hard during their missions, as is evidenced by the statistics released by the Cuban government detailing the thousands of consultations, vaccinations and operations carried out by Cuban internationalists in Angola.[123] Outside working hours many nurses ran additional clinics to cope with demand, and Cuban-Angolan working relations were reportedly very good. The MPLA government was particularly happy to employ Cuban as opposed to Western doctors for several reasons, not least of which was the fact that the average Cuban doctor cost only a quarter of what they would have to pay for a similarly-qualified doctor from the next largest international provider of health care, the World Health Organisation

[122] Concepción (op. cit., p.113) recounts one occasion when a patient replied to a question in kuanhama to the translator, who then spoke to the nurse in kimbundu, who then translated into Portuguese which the Cuban doctor could more or less understand. The standard of translation was, understandably, not always high. One internationalist nurse recounted that after speaking for several minutes in local dialect with a patient the Angolan translators would often simply say: "He says no". Nevertheless, Cuban medical staff put their faith in the medical examinations they themselves carried out, the same nurse recounting one occasion when a patient told the translator she was suffering from tremors and recurrent tape-worms only for the Cubans to discover that she was actually suffering from cardiovascular problems.

[123] For example, between January and September 1977 (the first year of the programme) Cuban doctors carried out one million consultations and 16,000 operations (Concepción, op. cit., p.22). By 1982, nineteen technical health schools scattered across fifteen Angolan provinces were being operated either partially or fully by Cuban staff (Diaz-Briquets, op. cit., p.59). Cuban medical staff gained a great deal of experience in dealing with illnesses uncommon in Cuba – such as malaria and polio – and made some interesting (and as yet unexplained) medical discoveries. For example, it was noticed that in general Angolans didn't suffer from cardiovascular problems and that heart-attacks were very rare indeed. No satisfactory explanation was ever found for this (author's interview with internationalist nurse, Havana, September 1997).

(WHO).[124] But the Cubans were also prepared to put up with more basic living conditions than their Western counterparts – medical teams would often share one apartment between them and were happy to eat mass-prepared meals as a group[125] – and Cubans were notably more sociable, easy-going and far less racist than other internationalists, in particular the Soviets and East Germans (see below). Most Cubans could communicate in 'Portuñol', and their innate ability to improvise when the necessary equipment or supplies were lacking (a skill learned from years living in Cuba's starved economy) was a major bonus in war-torn Angola where blackouts and shortages were a regular feature of everyday life. Inevitably the Cuban doctors were also in Angola to look after the thousands of Cuban personnel posted there, but their contribution to the fledgling Angolan health service cannot be understated. By 1978 three quarters of all doctors working in Angola were Cuban, and by 1982 they represented 30% of all Cuban medical personnel posted abroad.[126]

**The educational programme**

The task facing the MPLA government in education was an equally daunting one as at Independence over 90% of the population was illiterate.[127] It was not until Raúl Castro's visit to Angola in June 1977, however, that the first concrete steps were taken towards launching a Cuban educational programme for Angola. The reason for this delay is not clear, for Cuba had been providing educational assistance to developing countries since 1971 when it began constructing an enormous educational and training complex on the Isle of Pines (60 miles south of Havana Province) specifically for educating overseas students. Renamed 'la Isla de la Juventud' ('the Isle of Youth') in 1978 in these students' honour, the complex eventually boasted over sixty schools and an annual average of 15,000 students drawn from Africa, the

[124] This may be the main reason why in the 1980s Cuba had more medical staff working overseas than the WHO.
[125] Fidel Castro made this point in an interview in January 1985: "We send eight doctors to one apartment; it proves easier for the host nation to have eight doctors in small lodgings. If they seek a doctor in Europe, they must provide a home for the family, pay his vacations, and spend about $40,000 or $50,000 a year. Meanwhile, eight of our doctors live in one apartment, they are provided for, and are not paid for their work. Those are the bases of our cooperation in all countries" (interview reprinted in Deutchmann, op. cit., pp.96-97).
[126] Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., pp.56 & 58.
[127] Concepción, op. cit., p.17.

Americas and Asia, the students receiving their travel, board and education for free in return for manual work on the island's extensive citrus plantations during the harvest.[128] Speaking at a rally in Luanda on 12 June 1977, Raúl Castro effectively corrected this oversight, offering 2,000 scholarships for Angolan students to study on the Isle of Youth (an offer he eventually extended to include Mozambique), and over the next decade this programme steadily grew in size until by 1987 there were 4,000 Angolans studying on the Isle of Youth, representing roughly one quarter of all foreign students there.[129]

The MPLA government also desperately needed teachers in Angola itself, and the following March (1978) the first internationalist teacher brigade – the Destacamento Pedagógico Internacionalista (DPI) 'Che Guevara', made up of volunteer secondary school teachers – arrived in Angola. The delay in sending this brigade to Angola – which arrived a full two years after the completion of the 'Second Liberation War' – has not been explained by the Cuban government, but it was probably caused by the lack of qualified teachers volunteering for the mission, a sign that internationalist service in Angola may not have been universally popular in the Cuban teaching profession.[130] The 732-strong contingent began teaching the following month, and they were joined in 1979 by 500 primary school teachers from the 'Frank País' DPI who were distributed among various schools across Angola.[131] Like their medical comrades the Cuban teachers had enormous difficulties surmounting the language barrier, almost none of them having received any Portuguese lessons before going to

[128] In 1959 the new Revolutionary government launched an ambitious settlement programme on the Isle of Pines, setting up vast citrus fruit plantations with thousands of Cuban volunteers and swelling the pre-Revolution population from 10,000 to 70,000. Overseas students on the Isle of Youth were officially part of the 'International Work Brigades' and from September to December would help with the citrus fruit harvest. Baker (op. cit., pp.406-407) maintains that over 150,000 foreign students studied at some time on the Isle of Youth.

[129] Mesa Lago & Belkin (op. cit., p.164) note that by the end of 1979 there were 7,200 African students studying on the Isla de la Juventud: 1,200 Angolans, 2,300 Ethiopians, 2,300 Mozambicans, 600 Namibians & 800 other nationalities. By 1984 this had risen to 10,000, peaking at 16,000 in 1987 (Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., pp.67-69). Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, however, the schools on the Isle of Youth were gradually closed down, and today only a handful of overseas students are still studying there.

[130] During the Mariel boatlift two years later, a large number of teachers were targeted during the mob hysteria, perhaps suggesting they were among the first to turn against the new systems introduced into Cuba during the early 1970s.

Angola, and although most made do with 'Portuñol' it took an average of two months before the majority of the students fully understood them.[132] For this reason the MPLA government suggested extending the average teaching mission from one to two years, as most Cuban teachers had overcome any difficulties communicating by the end of their first year.[133] In the early 1980s the programme was further expanded with the setting up of new schools in remote areas and the provision of 60 Cuban professors for Luanda's Agostinho Neto University, and for most of the rest of the decade there were around 2,000 Cuban teachers (of all different types) working Angola.[134] The Cuban educational mission in Angola was highly-successful, and by 1984 over one million Angolans had been taught to read and write.[135]

**The technical aid programme**

The third and largest branch of Cuba's humanitarian mission to Angola – in terms of manpower – was the technical assistance programme which began shortly after Cuba and Angola signed their first economic and technical agreement (July 1976).[136] Following the 'Second Liberation War', the MPLA government was desperately short of qualified technicians to assist in the reconstruction of the dozens of bridges, roads

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[131] Jane Franklin, Cuba-Angola: A Chronology, 1961-1988, Center for Cuban Studies, New York, 1989 & Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., p.62. Between 1978 and 1981 there were a total of 1,713 internationalist teachers in the DPI 'Che Guevara' (Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares, op. cit., p.57).

[132] Of the 580 Cuban internationalist teachers polled by Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares for their thesis (op. cit., p.43), 78.6% of them admitted that they knew no Portuguese at all before arriving in Angola, and a third of those few who did had been self-taught. Of the 462 Angolan school children polled (op. cit., p.45), 48.05% said they started to understand their Cuban teachers after three or four weeks of lessons, and 40.24% after two months. Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares note, however, that the skill of the average Cuban teacher was sufficient to overcome most communication difficulties, as would seem to be confirmed by the finding that only 1.29% of students polled still did not understand their teacher at the end of the year.

[133] The effect of thousands of Cuban teachers using 'Portuñol' to teach their students may have unintentionally influenced the use of Portuguese in Angola, a language whose use in Angola had already dropped dramatically as a result of the war, the flight of thousands of native Portuguese speakers and the government's promotion of native languages. Several Angolans I met suggested that Angolan children's use of the exclamation 'Amigo!' for addressing all foreigners comes from the Cubans, as the word is rarely used in this way in Angolan Portuguese.

[134] Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., pp.62-63 & Fumero Castro & Mijares Tabares, op. cit., p.39. The schools in remote areas were known as ESBEC (Escuelas Secundarias Básicas en El Campo, 'Basic Secondary Schools in the Countryside').

[135] On 8 September 1983 Angola celebrated World Literacy Day by announcing that 900,000 Angolans had learnt to read and write since independence. Following the ninth Literacy Campaign in 1984 that number topped one million (Concepción, op. cit., p.106).

[136] Further technical/economic agreements were signed in February 1978, May 1981 and April 1982.

and buildings damaged in the fighting, and in addition needed help in building thousands of new houses for the refugee populations swelling Angola's major cities.[137] Cuba was particularly well-equipped to meet this need, and in January 1977 the first Cuban construction technicians arrived to begin rebuilding Angola's shattered infrastructure. Training over 4,000 Angolan apprentices as they worked,[138] over the next five years the Cuban construction brigade built around fifty new bridges and 2,000 houses in Luanda (many of them in the notoriously-poor Golfe musseque),[139] re-opening several thousand miles of road and (partially) re-connecting the electricity and telephone networks. Encouraged by the success of the operation the Cuban government drew up plans to expand it threefold but, either due to a lack of funding or to an inability to find suitably-qualified volunteers, these plans were never realised and the number of Cuban construction workers in Angola remained at around 2,000 for the remainder of the 1980s.[140] The quality of the construction brigade's workmanship is still disputed, however, for although Cuban rates were highly-competitive with the West there were reports of shoddy, late and seriously over-budget projects, all of which undercut the lauded success of the brigade's programme.[141]

Cuban specialists also tried to rehabilitate Angola's ailing coffee plantations which only four years before had made Angola the world's fourth largest coffee exporter, but with the spread of UNITA activity across Angola their efforts were doomed to failure, as were initially-successful attempts to resurrect Angola's sugar plantations.[142]

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[137] During the Cuban occupation big cities such as Luanda, Benguela and Lobito saw their populations explode as thousands of refugees flooded in from the countryside to escape the fighting and the spread of UNITA. Provinces such as Cuando Cubango which before the war had been prosperous and populous (if remote) became almost uninhabited, and remain so to this day.

[138] In the technical mission's first year a total of 4,438 Angolans studied construction under Cuban specialists (Concepción, op. cit., p.22).

[139] Díaz-Briquets (op. cit., pp.75-76) notes that between 1977 and 1978 twenty Cuban construction technicians oversaw the work of 1,600 Angolan construction workers on the Golfe musseque.

[140] Concepción (op. cit., p.21) notes that by the end of 1977 3,500 Cuban technicians and workers had served in Angola. In 1980 there were 7,000 Cuban construction workers overseas, but by 1983 this had not trebled as planned but had only risen to 8,000, a figure which was not exceeded throughout the 1980s (Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., pp.72-74).

[141] Díaz-Briquets, op. cit., pp.73 & 76.

[142] Cuban assistance enabled the shattered sugar industry to produce 40,000 tonnes of sugar for the 1976-77 harvest, an impressive feat coming only three months after end of the 'Second Liberation War' (Concepción, op. cit., p.21). By the late 1980s, however, the sugar and coffee industries had all but collapsed.

More controversial, however, was Cuba's involvement in logging operations in Cabinda's vast Mayombe forest. The world's second largest rain forest, the Mayombe had already been exploited by Portuguese loggers before Independence, and once the threat from FLEC rescinded the MPLA government was keen to see logging re-start in the enclave. Cuba responded by sending a massive contingent of internationalists to Cabinda – over 500 men supported by 100 Angolans – to work on what would become Cuba's single largest civilian project in Angola (the larger teaching and medical brigades being split up and spread more evenly across Angola's territory).[143] The Contingente Forestal 'Arnaldo Milián' set up its principal camp in Buco Zau (85 miles northeast of Cabinda city) with six smaller working camps in the forest itself, and in only three months it cut down nearly 14,000 cubic metres of wood, a feat which would normally have taken two years.[144] The spectacular success of this project inevitably led to accusations that the Cuban brigade had wreaked enormous environmental damage on the Mayombe, destroying massive sections of virgin rain forest. Indeed many locals viewed the Cuban brigade much as they viewed their Portuguese predecessors – as foreigners who had come to Cabinda to plunder its wealth at their expense.[145] The Cuban government has vehemently denied it caused extensive damage to the Mayombe during this period, but the controversy remains, as does a great deal of bad feeling among the local population.[146]

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[143] So large was the Cuban contingent that when it arrived many locals believed it was a second invasion force, a phenomenon Concepción (op. cit., p.109) puts down to 'enemy propaganda'. The logging brigade was attacked at one point by FLEC guerrillas, but a rapid sweep of the area by Cuban Special Forces quickly eliminated the threat and there were no other incidents reported during the logging operation (interview with veteran).

[144] Concepción, op. cit., pp.108-109. Each camp had an eating area, medical post and sleeping quarters. For serious illnesses there was a fourteen-man Cuban medical brigade in Cabinda City working at a hospital set up by the Cubans, which was named after an internationalist who died in Cabinda on 25 March 1976, Idilio Rodríguez Borrego (Luis, op. cit., pp.166-167).

[145] During research in Angola in 1998 several Angolans (some of them veterans of the war) brought up the Cuban logging operation in Cabinda, accusing the Cubans of plundering Angola's wealth and causing enormous environmental damage to the area. The Congo region has suffered appalling environmental damage in the past forty years from war, the flight of Rwandan refugees into the region and the explosion in poaching having all but wiped out Congo's famous gorillas.

[146] The controversy of the Cuban logging brigade is one of many complaints local Cabindans make about Luanda's exploitation of the enclave. Although the Angolan government receives the vast majority of its hard currency revenue from Cabindan oil, most Cabindans believe their enclave has been ignored in terms of social services and infrastructure, while the Luanda ruling elite has concentrated on plundering Cabinda's riches for its own ends.

## Internationalist casualties in Angola, 1975-1991

The question of how many casualties the Cubans suffered in Angola is perhaps the single most contentious issue of the Cuban operation in Angola, and will be discussed in full in the last chapter.[150] What is indisputable, however, is that as a result of confining the vast majority of Cubans in Angola to barracks (with only occasional sorties on patrols or on the caravanas), most of the casualties suffered were the result of accidents and disease. Few reliable figures are available, but probably only a third of Cuban casualties were suffered in combat either with UNITA or the SADF, and many of those from landmines, booby-traps and ambushes.[151] Official figures state that just over a third of those killed died in accidents, but judging from most veterans' accounts it was probably more like half, the most common cause being guns going off accidentally and dangerous (or drunken) driving.[152] As in peace time operations most accidents were caused by a failure to follow procedure, and there were numerous aircraft and helicopter crashes throughout the Cuban occupation, many of which were subsequently claimed by UNITA as 'kills'.[153] Disease – in particular malaria (or 'paludismo' as it was called in Angola) and tropical fever – took hundreds of Cuban lives (a quarter of all those killed), and the Cuban medical brigades initially had great difficulty treating some of these conditions as they were almost unknown in Cuba. Cuban civilian casualties were likewise light, although there were occasional incidents during the Angolan war in which civilian internationalists were killed (such as the UNITA truck bomb in Huambo in April 1984 which caused nearly 200

[150] The Cuban government put the official number of Cubans killed in Angola between 1975 and 1990 at 2,016 (published in Granma, 6 December 1989), a figure Raúl Castro increased to 2,077 in May 1991 when the last internationalists returned. Both UNITA and South Africa have made outrageously-inflated claims (to the tune of 10,000 dead and double that number wounded), but the true figure is probably somewhere between three and five thousand killed, with at least 10,000 wounded or incapacitated.

[151] According to the Cuban government (in Granma, 6 December 1989) 39% were killed in combat, 26% died of disease and 35% were killed in accidents. This figure is broadly in line with figures published by Juan Bautista Benítez Suárez (Equinoccio de los heroes, Editorial Sanlope, Las Tunas, Cuba, 1993, pp.53-56), detailing eleven internationalists from Las Tunas who were killed in Angola. He notes that 36% died in combat (4), 18% from disease (2), and 45% in accidents (5).

[152] One veteran (in interview) remembered a senior FAR officer sending out half a dozen soldiers in a truck to buy him supplies, and them all being killed in a crash on the return journey. Some internationalists put the high number of driving accidents down to the youth of many of the Cuban drivers, most of whom had never handled military vehicles of the size the Soviets were providing.

casualties, see next chapter). However, the overall impression one gets from talking to veterans is that Cuban casualties did occur but not in great numbers,[154] and that it was only once Cuban troops began to get drawn into the main fighting against UNITA and the SADF in late 1987 that casualties started to mount.

**Return procedure at the end of an internationalist mission**

On completion of their mission, Cuban internationalists were gathered in Luanda where they filled out the relevant paperwork (often on board the Leonid Sovinov), bought whatever they could afford at the specially-provided shops in Cacuaco and underwent a cursory medical examination before returning to Cuba (most civilians and officers flew while the bulk of the soldiers returned by ship).[155] On arrival in Cuba they were then transferred to military camps for two to three days of medical tests, the military doctors checking in particular for malaria and other tropical diseases, and only once they were given the all-clear were the allowed to return to their homes.[156] The exact number of Cubans affected by disease is not known (the Cuban government has released no figures), but is probable that several thousand Cubans returned from Angola with debilitating diseases, some quite possibly with HIV.[157] The debate over whether Cuban troops were responsible for bringing AIDS into Cuba from Angola has been ruthlessly suppressed by the Cuban government which claims – perhaps accurately – that the disease was first introduced into Cuba by

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[153] One veteran recalled that during the two years he was stationed in Angola (1983-85), his unit lost eight MiG fighters in training accidents. Another recalled seeing an Mi-8 crash accidentally into the canyon opposite the Cambamba dam near Malanje, killing four Cuban officers.

[154] One Cuban sapper recalled that in two years of duty in Angola (including nearly a dozen caravanas), nobody in his platoon was killed or wounded, a not untypical story. Figures given to me by Lt-Cl Montpier from Víbora Parque municipality (northern Havana) show that out of the 2,752 men who carried out internationalist missions in Angola, only 36 died there (or less than 1.5%).

[155] The experience of those few Cubans who did stay in Angola (perhaps 100 individuals in total) and the changing role of internationalists in Angola following the Cuban withdrawal will be discussed in the last chapter.

[156] Various 'Centrales a Viajeros' (Centres for Travellers) existed in and around Havana, most famously at Lomba Blanca, where returning internationalists underwent several days of medical tests. Any Cuban who had been taken ill during his or her return journey was admitted to the Luís Soto Alba Naval Hospital in Havana which had a unit specialising in tropical diseases.

[157] Many Cubans returned from Angola crippled by disease, most commonly by malaria (perhaps 90% of cases), but also by strange tropical fevers, unknown strains of hepatitis, obscure eye and skin diseases, and even cirrhosis. Most veterans remember colleagues who were incapacitated by disease in Angola, but the actual number of affected Cubans is not known. One veteran who served in the FAR's

foreign tourists.[158] However, the appearance of the HIV virus in the Cuban population only five years after the Cuban intervention in Angola began – coupled with the death from AIDS of several prominent Cuban artists (such as Carlos Alfonso & Reinaldo Arenas) who fled to Florida during the Mariel boatlift – fuelled rumours that the disease had been introduced into Cuba from Africa, and as exaggerated reports about AIDS swept the world in the early 1980s, there was a panicked reaction from the Cuban government which introduced draconian measures to prevent the disease spreading any further. From the mid-1980s onwards HIV-testing was introduced for all internationalists before they left Angola, and anyone diagnosed with HIV was transferred on arrival in Cuba to a special hospital (Los Cocos) where they were interned indefinitely.[159] The story of the Los Cocos inmates – and the tragic collapse of the care provided to them – remains a scandal which has yet to be fully uncovered.[160]

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Departamento de Abastecimiento claimed that over 10,000 Cubans were wounded or incapacitated by service in Angola, suggesting that many thousands of these were affected by disease.

[158] AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) was first diagnosed in 1981, and following research between 1982 and 1984 it was found to be caused by a single virus which was named HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) by an international commission in 1986. Scientific opinion is still divided over the origin of the disease, but in the 1980s Cuba was awash with unsubstantiated rumours that Cuban troops had brought the disease back from Angola. The Cuban government's argument that foreign tourists brought the disease into Cuba is undermined somewhat by the fact that tourism didn't really take off in significant numbers until the early 1990s, a full decade after the disease was discovered. Ultimately, the Cuban government is extremely secretive in its handling of the AIDS issue, and although the authorities claim the virus's spread is fully under control, one feels there is probably a huge amount of denial for the magnitude of the problem facing ordinary Cubans (who are notoriously lax at using contraception).

[159] In December 1986 the FAR issued a decree forbidding all Cuban soldiers stationed in Angola from having blood transfusions from Africans so as to avoid the risk of infection with HIV (Al J Venter, 'Angola: decimotercer año de conflicto', Revista Internacional de Defensa, Año XXI, No. 2/1988, Geneva, 1988, p.124), a measure which illustrates the fear at the time over this unknown virus. Brig.-Gen. Del Pino bluntly described Los Cocos as 'a jail' (Del Pino, op. cit., p.34).

[160] One popular and oft-repeated urban myth in Havana concerns Los Cocos (located on Boyeros only a few miles from the old airport). The story goes that when news of this new disease first broke in Cuba, many Cubans believed that like other STD's (syphilis or gonorrhoea) it would shortly have a cure. Thus when the Cuban government launched its new, state-of-the-art HIV treatment centre at Los Cocos amid a fanfare of publicity, a group of young Cuban artists decided to deliberately infect themselves with the virus so that they could be interned at Los Cocos and enjoy the (for Cuba) luxury facilities until such time as a cure appeared. Several dozen of these infected Cubans then spent the rest of the 1980s slowly wasting away in Los Cocos with no cure in sight. Even more tragically, following the collapse of the Soviet Union funding for Los Cocos dried up, and today those inmates who are still alive are allegedly enduring the most terrible conditions and depravation. Regardless of whether this story is actually true or not, the very fact that it is so often repeated and believed is a reflection of the generalised ignorance surrounding AIDS in Cuba, and is the direct product of the Cuban regime's stranglehold on all information coming into Cuba.

The vast majority of Cubans cleared their medical tests, however, and immediately returned home and rejoined civilian life, the reservists and civilians taking up their old jobs (which had been kept for them in their absence) while those completing their national service either went to university or entered the job market for the first time. All internationalists received certificates and medals for their missions, those who had seen combat (including some civilians) receiving the '1st Class' internationalist medal while the vast majority received '2nd Class' internationalist medals. Occasionally veterans were singled out for Party recognition, but it was not until the latter stages of the Cuban operation in Angola (in the late 1980s) that the regime started to celebrate the return of its internationalists with elaborate ceremonies and marches, the most important of which – at the Cacahual military monument on 7 December 1989 – marked the effective end of the internationalist phase of the Cuban Revolution (see Chapter 12). The experience of some of Cuba's four hundred thousand internationalists after their return to Cuba – and their thoughts and feelings about internationalism and the experience of serving in Angola as they look back with hindsight – will be discussed in the conclusion.